ALL STORIES NEW . . . NO REPRINTS

RANCH ROMANCES

25¢

A THRILLING PUBLICATION
SECOND SEPTEMBER NUMBER

FEATURING
POWDERSMOKE TRAIL
by J. L. Bouma

BEGINNING
BULLET LAW
a new serial
by Charles N. Heckelmann

25¢ RANCH ROMANCES 2nd SEPT. 1955

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Mail this coupon with only $1 for your Spot Reducer on approval. Pay postman $8.95 plus delivery—or send $9.95 (full price) and we ship postage prepaid. Use it for ten days in your own home. Then if not delighted return Spot Reducer for full purchase price refund. Don't delay! You have nothing to lose—except ugly, embarrassing, undesirable pounds of FAT. MAIL COUPON now!

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Chances are, he's cashing in on a new way to impress the boss—*self-improvement on the QT.*

With jobs getting tighter, employers are giving the cold eye to men who obviously are trying to make an impression without anything to back it up. The phony eager beavers, overtime hounds and front office pets are due for a rude awakening.

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I.C.S. sees this showing up in a great new surge of interest in advanced technical and business courses.

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31st Year
OF PUBLICATION

SECOND SEPTEMBER NUMBER

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RANCH ROMANCES

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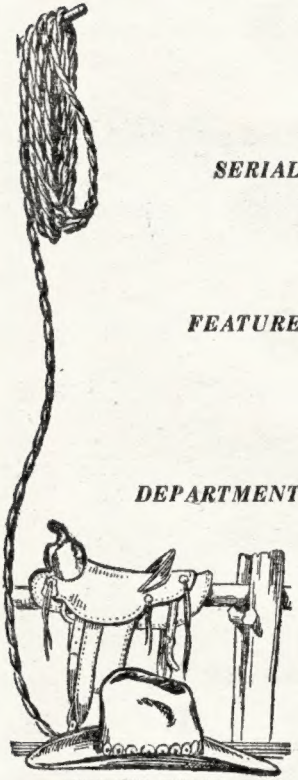

HELEN TONO
Editor

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Lonely Fellow

Dear Editor:

I am a lonely fellow of 18, and would like very much to correspond with girls from 15 to 18. I have dark brown hair and eyes, am 5'7", and weigh 137 lbs. My hobby is photography. I will gladly exchange photos, and will answer all letters received.

CLIFFORD G. BRIER

102 South Pine
Emporia, Kansas

Mississippian in Japan

Dear Editor:

I am in the Air Force and have been stationed in Japan for the past year. I haven't been getting much mail, so if possible I would like to get my name in "Our Air Mail." I am from Mississippi, am 5'8" tall, weigh 155 lbs., and am 22 years old. I would like to get some mail from home, and will answer every letter I get. Thanks.

A/lc W. L. DODD AF—14439242
84th R.S.M. A.P.O. 73 Box 160
San Francisco, California

Things to Say

Dear Editor:

I would like pen pals between the ages of 14 to 18, from all parts of the U.S. I think we could have a great deal to say to each other. I am 16, and like nearly all sports. I don't care how many letters I receive; I promise to answer all of them.

DAVID FOGG

531 Cohas Avenue
Manchester, New Hampshire

Faithful Reader

Dear Editor:

I have been a faithful reader of your magazine for fifteen years and still think it's the best. I would like to hear from as many people as possible. If you will publish my plea I promise to answer each letter. I am 35 years old, 6' tall, and weigh 180 lbs. I like all sports. Won't some of you guys and gals from 25 to 50 write and fill up my mail box? Thank you.

BOB LANDERS

4432 Forest Street
Kansas City, Missouri

Going on 17

Dear Editor:

It gets pretty lonely in my small town; the only entertainment we have is a Friday night dance. I am 16 years old, and will be 17 soon. I have brown hair, blue eyes, weigh 120 lbs., and 5' 3" tall. I like all kinds of sports and enjoy all kinds of music but opera. I'd like to hear from girls and boys between the ages of 16 to 24, but will write to anyone else too. I'll also exchange photos.

COLLEEN SMITH

Route #1
Grand Junction, Iowa

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 30 years Our Air Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Desert Queen

Dear Editor:

I live on a ranch 21 miles from the nearest town and 45 miles from school. I'm 5' 7" tall, weigh 110 lbs., have brown hair and dark blue eyes, and am 15 years old. There isn't any other place for miles around, and it's kind of lonesome here in the summer time; but I like the open desert and wouldn't leave it for anything. Won't all you guys and gals fiill my mail box?

LINDA RUSSU

Circle Locust Ranch
Lucerne Valley, California

On a Mountain Top

Dear Editor:

I'm in the Air Force, stationed in a remote site on a mountain in Alaska, and believe me I know what loneliness is. We are about 100 miles from any town. I was wondering if there might be some girls in the United States who would care to correspond with me. I am 20 years old, 6' 2" tall, and weigh 190 lbs. I went to the University of Nebraska for two years, where I majored in Physical Education. Well, girls, here I am; now it's up to you.

JACK DOVENBARGER

AF 17402355—Box 200
744 AC&W Squadron
A.P.O. 720, Seattle, Washington

Come on, Kids!

Dear Editor:

This is my first try at getting pen pals. I love to write, and will answer all letters I receive. I'll also exchange pictures. I have light brown hair, weigh 100 lbs., am 5' 1¾" tall, and have blue eyes. I love to dance, and like popular music of all sorts. I am 18 years old and just graduated from high school. Come on, kids, write to me.

MARY McNEIL

Box 343
La Salle, Colorado

Sportswoman

Dear Editor:

I am a girl, 15 years old, who likes all sports, especially swimming, basketball, skating, dancing, and horseback riding. I have blond hair, brown eyes, am 5′ 3″ tall, and weigh 109 lbs. I also like hillbilly music, and like to read and write letters. So how about filling my box with mail?

ROSELLA WARD

Route 1, Box 207
Garvin, Oklahoma

Good Humor Man

Dear Editor:

I'm the guy who tries to make all the gals happy when I come around with the good old ice cream truck; I'm a "Good Humor" salesman. I just love the girls, and would like to hear from all of them—blondes, brunettes, redheads, or what have you. Please fill my mail box, and I promise to answer each and every letter I get.

ALBIN C. SYVERTSEN

Apt. 103
4065 N. Sheridan Road
Chicago 13, Illinois

Mexican Indian

Dear Editor:

I've been reading RANCH ROMANCES for some time, and would now like to join the pen pal column. I have brown hair and brown eyes, am 16 years old, weigh 122 lbs., and am 5′ 5″ tall. My ancestry is one-fifth Mexican and the rest Apache Indian. How about writing, boys and girls?

VELARIA VICTOR

P.O. Box #165
San Carlos, Arizona

Blue-Eyed Blonde

Dear Editor:

I am a widow with three young sons. I'm 32 years old, have blue-gray eyes and long silver-blond hair, weigh 115 lbs., and am 5′ 4½″ tall. I live with my mother on a big farm where we raise Shetland ponies. I have four horses and ride a great deal. I can't say I like sports—I'm just in love with the outdoors and my horses. I'd like to hear from real honest-to-gosh ranch men or cowboys, as I've always wanted to learn about ranch life.

MARGUERITE E. READY

Box 71
Kenyon, Rhode Island

Girls Wanted

Dear Editor:

I've been reading RANCH ROMANCES for ten years, but this is my first try at "Our Air Mail." I'm married, am 24 years old, 5′ 1″ tall and weigh 112 lbs. My hair and eyes are brown. My hobbies are writing letters, collecting salt and pepper shakers, singing. I'd like to hear from women and girls, 16 to 60, from all over the world. I promise to answer all letters, and will exchange photos.

MRS. VALERY THILLEN

Caledonia
Minnesota

Flute Player

Dear Editor:

I am 12 years old, have blond hair and brown eyes, am 5′ tall, and weigh 100 lbs. I like hillbilly and popular songs, and I play the flute. I'm in the seventh grade at school. I'd like to hear from boys and girls 12 to 15 years old, and will try to answer all letters I receive.

KAREN CROSBY

63 Sandy Lane
Walnut Creek, California

Brighten Her Life

Dear Editor:

I'm a very lonely widow, and life is hard for me now, as I was left with five children to raise. Writing letters helps brighten what spare time I have. I am 40 years old, and have brown hair and brown eyes. I make friends quickly, and am considered a good sport. I'd like my mail box to be loaded down with letters from you fellows and girls. I'll answer all the mail I receive.

OLIVIA CHISM

Box 653
Burnet, Texas

Stamp Collectors

Dear Editor:

We collect stamps, and would like to exchange stamps with people all over the world. But we'd like to hear from others too, even if they don't collect stamps. Kathleen is 15, 5′ 4″, with brown hair and eyes. Judy is 12, 5′ 2½″ tall, also with brown hair and eyes. Please drop us a line, and send snaps if possible.

JUDY ERICKSON
KATHLEEN COTE

Dorintosh
Sask., Canada

Easily Pleased

Dear Editor:

I'm 28 years old, have naturally curly red hair and green eyes, am 5′ 2″ tall, and weigh 95 lbs. As I'm easily pleased, I enjoy almost everything. But my main interests are music, dancing, writing letters, singing and playing the guitar. I'd enjoy hearing from servicemen, and also other men and women. I promise each and every one an answer.

COLLEEN CORPRON

406 N. D. Street
Oskaloosa, Iowa

No Rainy Days for Her

Dear Editor:

I'm making a repeat performance at trying to get into "Our Air Mail," and hope this time you'll print my letter. I'm a girl of 17 with dark hair and blue eyes, and am 5′ 5″ tall. I like almost everything but rainy days. I promise to answer all letters, so come on, boys and girls, fill my mail box.

DOROTHY SEBBER

Box 206
Iowa Falls, Iowa

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TRAIL DUST

PARDNERS! Here's an open invitation to you to cut sign on colorful happenings of today's West. Send clippings to us, and include the name and date of the paper where you found it. We'll send you one dollar per usable item; in case of duplicates, first come, first served!

BOYS in Effingham, Ill., who strung adhesive tape through the trees, hoping to catch birds with it, were a little put out later to learn that the birds were building their nests out of the tape.

A GRAND RAPIDS, Mich., man took up an expensive hobby because, he claimed, he couldn't sleep. He was fined $25 after being found, at 2 a.m., shooting arrows at school buildings.

EVER wonder what a policeman does when he's sitting around the stationhouse with no work to do? Then you'd be interested to know that a New Orleans, La., cop was suspended recently for literally killing time by shooting the clock off the police station wall.

TRUE love doesn't run smooth, even for a parakeet in Industrial City, Mo., who showers his affection on a duck-shaped salt shaker. The real bird gets violently angry when his girl friend fails to respond to his love.

A MOTORIST in Cedar City, Utah, fired his rifle four times at a bobcat he saw on the highway. He missed and finally, out of ammunition and patience, threw a rock which caught the cat between the eyes and killed it.

CONSTRUCTION was going on at a great rate on the upper stories of Pocatello, Idaho's *new* courthouse while a couple were getting married on the first floor. The minister had decided that the old courthouse, stripped and about to be torn down, was a too-depressing setting for the wedding ceremony.

"HAVE a father on me. I'm the baby of an 8-lb. cigar," read the birth announcement sent out by a dazed new father in Oakland, Calif.

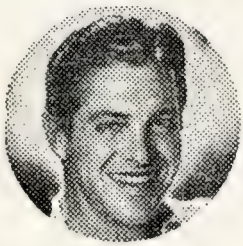
AN 84-YEAR-OLD Omaha, Nebr., woman has just retired from the "temporary" job she took in her husband's store in 1910 to help him out during a busy season.

PEOPLE in Colorado Springs, Colo., must be mighty honest, judging by the experience of a merchant there who puts $1.50 in a box marked "parking meter change" outside his store each morning. He says he always finds $1.50—or more—in the box at closing time.

KINDERGARTEN children in Tulare, Calif., put their fingerprints on record in the police department—as signatures to a letter they sent thanking the patrolman who helps them cross the street each day.

THEY'VE changed the menu in the Chicago, Ill., jail from just bologna sandwiches to a choice of "bologna with mustard," "bologna with mayonnaise," or "plate of sliced bologna."

RANCH FLICKER TALK



by movie editor BOB CUMMINGS

This famous top-hand of stage, screen and TV corrals the best of the Westerns

THE FAR HORIZONS

Paramount's new Western re-creates all the perilous excitement of Lewis and Clark's venture into the uncharted wilderness

FRED MacMURRAY has added another feather to that Stetson of his. This time he's the star of Paramount's tremendous production of the Lewis and Clark expedition. And that puts him back out West, where we like to see him—part of the time, at least. As Lewis, Fred actually covers a lot of territory, and that's what makes a story.

It all happened more than 150 years ago, when Thomas Jefferson sent Lewis and Clark to chart the newly-purchased Louisiana Territory.

If they could push on and claim all the land to the Pacific Ocean, so much the better. They did, but it took them two years and every minute of the time was fraught with danger.

Paramount has gone all out to capture the perilous excitement of the original expedition. And with Vista Vision, Technicolor, and a cast that would be terrific anywhere, how could they fail?

Charlton Heston, who is just about the busiest young man in Hollywood these days, plays Lieutenant Clark. Donna Reed gets my nomination right now for an Academy Award for her portrayal of Sacajawea, the young Indian girl who led the expedition safely to the sea.

Then there's Herbert Heyes as Thomas Jefferson. He is the same height and weight as Jefferson was, and even looks like him without the help of a make-up man. Add Fred, as Captain Lewis, to all this, and Barbara Hale for a little romantic interest, and you have an unbeatable team.

The Far Horizons was filmed in Wyoming, where some of the most rugged and picturesque scenery in the country can be found. That was the whole idea, of course. The terrain had to be as rough and primitive as possible to get across the tremendous—almost overwhelming—hazards with which the original expedition contended.

The plan was so successful that everybody could hardly wait to get back to the safety of the studio.

Fred told me all about it when I saw him back on the Paramount lot.

"Lewis and Clark thought they had troubles!" he said. "They should have seen ours. Of course you can count on a few little irritations like sunburn, mosquito bites and wet feet when you make a picture like this. But while we were making *The Far Horizons*, everyone got soaked. In fact, it's lucky no one got pneumonia."

As he told me the story, it wasn't just a case of getting caught in a cloudburst. In fact, it was really lucky that nobody got drowned.

"Practically the whole cast was on a barge when it overturned," Fred explained, "and we all took a surprise bath in the Snake River, which is full of tricky currents and is icy cold.

"There were about eighteen of us milling around in the water, and that's pretty crowded when you're trying to avoid smashing into rocks and stay afoot without punching somebody in the eye."

Finally everyone made it to a sand bar, and one volunteer swam ashore, bringing back a small boat which rescued the party two at a time.

No one was in any real danger in that mishap, but later the director, Rudy Maté, fell overboard and came up under the barge. That time they were really in fast water, and much too close to the rapids for comfort. Rudy would certainly have been swept over if Charlton hadn't jumped in and grabbed him.

Charlton, however, had no complaints about the ruggedness of being a movie actor —not when he considered what the real Lieutenant Clark went through.

"For instance," he said, "one other time I was in the river—on purpose. I was portraying a heroic feat of Clark's, when he dove in to cut away a net across the river, which had been put there by Indians to ambush the party. The arrows whistling around my ears made me nervous, but I knew they were Hollywood arrows which couldn't harm a baby. I didn't like to think of how Clark must have felt—when those whistling arrows were real!"

Fred MacMurray, Donna Reed and Charlton Heston are set for trouble

Charlton Heston

Always An Actor

RANCH FLICKER TALK

CHARLTON HESTON is rapidly becoming one of Hollywood's most popular actors, and there are a lot of good reasons why. One is that he really never was anything else. Charlton is the only star I know who began his career in earnest in grammar school. He was so determined that the people back in his home town of Evanston, Illinois aren't a bit surprised at his success.

"They had to take me seriously," Charlton told me. "Every time the school had an entertainment, I was right in the middle of it. It didn't matter to me if it was a play, a variety show or a spelling bee. You couldn't keep me out of any of them. I was the biggest ham in the first grade."

By the time he reached high school, Charlton was practically a veteran, so he was in great demand for the leading role in every production. Since the Heston policy was act at every opportunity, he naturally accepted all of them, gaining experience all the time.

Charlton's devotion to duty began to pay off in college, where he was studying his favorite subject at Northwestern University's School of Speech. A number of radio shows came his way that would ordinarily be considered impressive for a young man barely 20. But Charlton wasn't exactly a fledgling actor by then. He had almost fifteen years of experience behind him, even if some of it was in reciting nursery rhymes.

Charlton's career was interrupted just once, but it took a war to do it. He spent three years in the Air Force, and then a few in summer stock. After that came Broadway, then television, and finally, as everyone who knew Charlton was sure it would, Hollywood.

There were a few long lean years on the way, though, mostly right after he was discharged from the Air Force. Charlton and his wife, Lydia, who is an actress, found it pretty hard to get back to work after a three year "vacation." The desire was there, but the jobs weren't.

"For a while Lydia and I had three dollars a week for food," Charlton said. "That's not quite enough for beans three times a day, and neither of us liked beans much anyway. We finally hit on a system that varied our diet a little bit, though. We would make a point of bringing cooking into almost any conversation. If we kept it going long enough, somebody was sure to have a pet dish that we must try sometime. Our enthusiasm was so sincere that we almost always wound up with a dinner invitation. And that, of course, was the whole idea."

But things have really changed for Charlton since then. Now he tells me he hasn't a care in the world.

"There was just one thing that worried me when I came to Hollywood—that I'd get in a rut. Nobody wants to get typed, and neither did I. But instead I seem to be getting such a variety of roles that sometimes I begin to wonder what I'm really like," Charlton said.

Paramount must have decided, when they first signed Charlton, that there wasn't a part he couldn't play. So it wasn't long before he was given a Western, and as soon as he finished that, another. You will see him in *The Far Horizons* and *Lucy Gallant.*

But Charlton still isn't worried about getting typed, even though he made two Westerns in succession. He has just finished *The Ten Commandments,* in which he plays Moses. And with that kind of versatility, it's easy to see why.

Paramount

Charlton's been learning to act since he was in the first grade

POWDERSMOKE

YOUNG JESS MacMURDY hit the trail in search of adventure . . . and rode straight into a world full of treachery and sudden death. . . .

NEAR sunset, Jess MacMurdy came from Carter's livery stable and looked across the flats at the trail herd grazing along the creek, aware of a quick excitement. It was a feeling he'd had often lately, an exciting restlessness, as if the promise of all his tomorrows lay beyond the horizon.

He imagined he heard a voice in the wind calling his name, and a strange longing swept all through him. It seemed to him the world was passing him by, and if he did not follow the call he would be forever lost in a whirl of uncertainty.

He heard his stepfather's limping footsteps behind

TRAIL

by J. L. BOUMA

him, and knew just about what the older man would say, before he spoke. "Stop daydreaming and clean those stalls."

Jess obeyed out of habit, the excitement flat in him now. Mr. Carter was a joyless, taciturn man who seemed never to have known the hunger of youth, but only bitterness and regret. Jess knew this was not necessarily true, but he could not help feeling that way about his stepfather.

This was another long dull day of cleaning up after horses. Twilight had come by the time he finished with the stalls and went to the watering trough to wash his hands and face. It was a slender eighteen-year-old face with a sensitive mouth, and eyes that could be both eager and reserved.

After washing, he climbed to the loft, a corner of which he had boarded off. He had slept there since his mother's death. He lit the lamp, took his clothes off, and put on a clean pair of levis and a flannel shirt. He was pulling his boots on when he heard horses out front.

He went out and climbed down the ladder, just as three men dismounted in the lantern light. He knew instinctively that they were with the trail herd.

"Curry 'em and grain 'em, Pop," one of them told Mr. Carter. He glanced at Jess. "What's the name of this burg, kid?"

"Rockville."

The other chuckled. "Another Colorado trail town." He built a cigarette, a rangy man in whipcord trousers and a corduroy coat. He had a hard, bony face, brown and weathered. It was neither a young face nor old, and somehow it appeared ageless. The eyes were narrowed, as though to hide whatever emotion might show in them.

He rolled the cigarette with deft movements of his long fingers, stuck it between his lips, and scratched a match. Smoke curled from his nostrils. He looked at Jess with a thin smile.

"Where's the best place to buy a drink?"

Jess was helping Mr. Carter strip gear from the horses. "Try the Trail's End."

The tall man chuckled again. "Trail's end," he repeated. "We can say that a month from now, when we reach the valley."

"Where's that?"

"Wyoming."

JESS took a long breath as he lifted a saddle to the rail. Wyoming! He heard one of the other men—a lean, blond young fellow with a narrow face and a thin mouth—saying impatiently, "Let's go, Kirk. I'm thirsty."

"Go ahead. Nobody's holding you."

The third man said quietly, "Better take it easy tonight, Otis. We don't want any trouble."

"Hell," Otis said disgustedly.

"You know what I'm talking about," the other said in that same quiet way. He was a stout man with a broad, leathery face and a graying mustache that drooped at the corners of his wide mouth. "I'm thinking of Bellamy. This is just about the time for him to start trouble."

"You worry too damn much, Oldun," Otis told him contemptuously. He tugged at the two crossed shell belts around his waist. "I'll handle anyone Bellamy sends against us."

Kirk looked at him. "Take it easy."

"Hell," Otis repeated disgustedly, and strode out into the darkness.

Oldun looked after him and said, "We'd better stick with him, Kirk."

"I'm responsible for him."

"I know that."

"Then stop rubbing that boy the wrong way, because one day he'll turn on you." He slapped Oldun on the shoulder and started out. "Let's get that drink."

Jess helped his stepfather curry the horses. Then he climbed back up to the loft and hitched his gun belt around his waist, his hands shaking with excitement. From the moment Kirk had mentioned Wyoming, Jess had pictured the Big Horn country, and it roused the same strange longing he'd had so often lately.

With a sudden laugh he swept the gun from its holster. It was a Navy Colt and had belonged to his father. He rarely wore it in town, but tonight was somehow different. It seemed now as if he had known all day that there would be a change in his life; it was as if the whole world lay waiting before him, and he was entering manhood at long last.

Jess hurried outside and walked swiftly along the street, feeling light-headed with anticipation. Lamplight streamed from the windows of the saloon. Shouts and laughter met him inside the door, and the odors of tobacco and whisky lay thick in his nostrils.

He hesitated, looked around. The place was pretty well crowded. He saw Otis sitting in on a poker game, his hat shoved to the back of his blond head, a scowl around his thin mouth. Kirk and Oldun were at the back end of the bar, a bottle and glasses in front of them.

Jess approached slowly and stopped on Kirk's right. He cleared his throat, said, "Mister—"

Kirk turned his head to glance at him, and Jess knew at once that the other did not recognize him. He saw Kirk's gaze drop to the Navy Colt, saw a sudden wariness ripple across the high-boned face.

The tall man's lips barely moved when he said, "Yeah?" He half turned, left hand on the edge of the bar, right hand near his holstered gun.

"I heard at the livery stable what you said about going to Wyoming," Jess said. "I'd like a job with your outfit."

Kirk's lips curled in a mocking smile. "Nothing doing, kid."

"Mister, I've worked cattle during round-up around here. I'll do anything—ride drag, help your wrangler, anything. Just give me a chance. I've been cooped up in this town all my life, and I want to get away from it."

"Then join the Army, if you're old enough," Kirk said. "But don't bother me about a job. I have all the riders I need." He turned back to his drink.

Jess looked at his profile, feeling as though everything had dropped inside of him. Oldun looked at him in a sympathetic sort of way, and Jess felt blood rise to his face.

He touched Kirk's arm, said desperately, "Listen, I'll work for my grub. All I want is a chance to see new country. When we get to Wyoming I'll quit, if you want me to I can always find work there."

"I told you I have no jobs," Kirk said, annoyed. "Go on home, kid."

"I'm only asking for a chance," Jess said hotly.

"Go ask somebody else," Kirk told him, and turned his back.

Jess walked away, dejected, shoulders slumped. The longing, the anticipation, all drained out of him. Join the Army, he thought bitterly. He didn't want to join the Army. Nor did he want to leave town jobless. He had seen too many saddle tramps stop at the livery stable for handouts, and he didn't want to become like them.

HE STOPPED and ordered a beer, and was regarding himself dully in the bar mirror when the door opened and two men came inside. The man who entered first was tall and thin with a hatchet face, and he swayed in half-drunken stupor as he looked around.

The second man—a husky, bowlegged fellow with a barrel chest—said something to the thin man, and then they both looked toward Kirk and Oldun.

From the way the thin man straightened and became still, Jess knew instinctively that he was not as drunk as he pretended to be. Then there was the business of the holstered gun strapped against his thigh with a leather thong. During his life Jess had seen only two known gunfighters, and they had both worn their guns that same way.

Jess felt his belly muscles tremble, remembering what Oldun had said about someone named Bellamy starting trouble. He watched the two men move toward Kirk and Oldun. The thin man was staggering a little again. The other moved ahead of him and came up beside Oldun, who turned and gave him a quick stare.

"Lew," he said. "I'll be damned. You're a long way from home, aren't you?"

"I'm buying steers for Bellamy," the husky man said, and grinned. "How goes it with you two? Get your herd this far?"

Oldun nodded. Kirk said nothing, but swung his head and glanced at Otis, whose back was turned. The thin man had stopped at a poker table nearby. Kirk did not seem to be aware of him.

Lew snapped his fingers at the bartender and said, "Glass." When it came he reached for the bottle in front of Oldun and poured a drink.

Oldun gave Kirk an uneasy look, but the tall man shrugged, a tight grin on his high-boned face.

"You've been gone a long time, Oldun," Lew said. "Since last fall, huh?"

"We had to wait out the winter before we could start the drive."

"It's a long drive, all the way from Texas." Lew grinned at himself in the bar mirror, elbows on the bar, heavy shoulders hunched forward. "Your family misses you, Oldun. I saw that girl of yours in town—Natalie. Some filly."

Oldun's mouth hardened, but he said nothing.

"Yeah," Lew went on, his tone suddenly nasty, "that little girl has more curves—"

Oldun gripped his arm and said in a strained voice, "Shut your mouth, Lew."

Lew jerked his arm loose. "Keep your hands to yourself!" he roared.

There was instant quiet in the saloon. Those nearest the disturbance drifted away at though they suddenly remembered urgent business somewhere else. Otis looked around, and then half turned in his chair and dropped his hand to the butt of his gun. Noticing this, the thin man took a step back and stood poised on the balls of his feet.

Oldun said, "Keep my family out of it, Lew. And don't be crowding me."

"You're the one that's crowding."

"Just keep the hell away from me," Oldun said gruffly, and faced the bar.

Lew laughed. He reached again for the bottle, but Kirk leaned over and clamped a hand on his wrist. "From now on buy your own drinks," he said curtly.

"Well, if it isn't Kirk," Lew said softly, and looked at him for a second. "I didn't even see you." He wrenched his wrist free, knocking over the bottle. "Don't do that to me!"

"Make something of it or clear out."

Lew's smile was crooked. "I have no quarrel with you."

"You damn well will have if you keep looking for it."

There was a moment of silence. Then the thin man said in a rasping tone, "We're looking, mister."

JESS saw it coming the moment Oldun and Kirk turned to look at the thin man. Lew laughed again and shouldered into Oldun, who staggered back against Kirk, knocking them both off balance. Kirk went to

one knee, and his hand swept toward his gun as the thin man cleared leather.

It was all so sudden that afterward Jess could not remember clearly how it happened. He could not recall drawing his gun, but it suddenly roared in his hand.

The thin man screamed, dropped his weapon, and clutched a shattered wrist. Lew turned, his gun half out of leather, a startled expression on his tough, weathered face.

Jess, eyes staring, lips taut, said harshly, "Drop it!"

Lew cursed and dropped his gun to the floor. Oldun went over and picked it up, then went after the thin man's gun.

He straightened, gave Jess a close look, and said, "All right, son."

Jess holstered the Navy Colt, feeling suddenly shaky and sick. He thought that, if he moved, his knees would buckle.

Kirk took the guns from Oldun and pushed them under his belt. He said in a contemptuous way, "Take your gunfighter out of here, Lew. And when you get home you can tell Bellamy that you didn't earn your pay. Now get out!"

Lew jerked his head at the thin man and started out. The thin man followed slowly, then hesitated and looked at Jess, his eyes unblinking and heartless as a snake's. Then he moved away, clutching his bloody wrist.

Oldun was shaking his head slowly, as though to clear it. "I sure never figured it would come to this."

Kirk rolled a cigarette. "It was stupid, the way they went at it."

"I never figured they'd use my family to start trouble," Oldun said, still shaking his head.

"When you have a fight on your hands you have to figure that anything can happen," Kirk said impatiently. He lit the cigarette and squinted at Jess through the smoke, and slowly he grinned. "Kid, that was fast shooting. Where'd you learn to do it?"

Jess swallowed. "It just happened."

"A good thing." Kirk grinned at Oldun. "That thin boy was fixing to bust us wide open. He would've, too, if the kid here hadn't taken a hand." It was the closest he ever came to thanking Jess for saving his life.

Otis came over, his face pale and set, and Kirk looked at him and spoke with an edge of contempt. "Here's the son that was gonna handle anyone Bellamy sent against us. What the hell happened to you?"

"You know who that thin fellow was?" Otis demanded in a shaky voice.

"Do you?"

"That was the Trinidad Kid. Lew must've stopped at Cheyenne to hire him."

"So what?"

Otis pressed his lips together so hard that they turned white. For a second he glared at Kirk. "This mean I'm through?"

"You said it."

The blond man swung his eyes to Jess, and murderous flames leaped in them. Without another word he wheeled out of the saloon.

Kirk gave a thin laugh and said, "Well, now I can use another rider. You still want that job, kid?"

"Sure."

"Just how sure?"

"I told you, didn't I?"

"Yeah, I know. But in case you don't know it, you made a couple of enemies tonight."

Jess was aware of that. He took a long breath. "I can take care of myself."

Kirk eyed him, an odd twist to his hard mouth. "All right. Be out to the herd tomorrow morning at six."

"I'll be there."

THAT evening, Jess told his stepfather that he was pulling out with the trail herd. The older man said gruffly, "All right, boy. I knew it'd happen sooner or later." He paused. "But don't spend your life drifting. You can't see it now, but the years pile up mighty fast, and are gone before you know it. Waste 'em, and one day you'll regret it. By then it'll be too late, and you'll be lucky to end up running a two-bit livery stable, the way I'm doing."

Jess was embarrassed. "You're doing all right."

Mr. Carter's mouth pulled in a bitter line. "It's a losing game, boy. All your life long you're going to lose what makes living worth while, and that takes in both people and dreams. You might have 'em for a while, but in the end you'll lose 'em and wonder what it was all about."

He paused again. "But if despite that you can still come out on top, you'll be all right. And I figure you have a chance, because there's no meanness in you." He chuckled wryly. "If you ever come by this way again, stop in and see me."

He looked at Jess with deep sadness, and for the first time it struck the boy how lonely this stepfather's life had been. He

had lost two wives, and his only son had been killed in the war. Now he's losing me, Jess thought. And it was in his mind to say that he would stay, but something within him hardened with the thought that he had to cut his own trail, come hell or high water.

"One more thing. You found out tonight that you're fast with a gun. That might seem like an advantage, but it won't be easy to to live with. Because wherever you go, you'll be a challenge to those that'll want to find out for themselves just how fast you really are. So don't trust folks just because you're taken by 'em. Every man has his little personal secrets, and there's more to most people than meets the eye."

Jess scarcely slept that night, his thoughts were so confused. But beyond the confusion he hugged a sense of freedom such as he had never known. It was as if something mysterious and exciting had taken the place of longing. For a brief second he pictured the Trinidad Kid clutching a bloody wrist. Then the picture faded and he fell asleep.

AS THE SUN came up, they started the drive. Jess had ridden out at dawn on his old sorrel, and Kirk had taken one look at the animal and had told him to take it back to town and sell it or give it away. Now Jess rode one of Kirk's string, a rangy young gray with spirit.

He rode drag and ate dust, but he didn't mind. The pleasure of seeing new country was like an ache. For the first few days there was no trouble, and then a spring storm broke over the land, and lightning rippled across the sky. Thunder jarred the earth, and that night the cattle were restless. They rose and milled, horns clashing, and Kirk had every man in the saddle.

"Keep 'em milling! We have two thousand head, and if they stampede we'll be another week gathering 'em in."

They kept the herd from stampeding. By morning, Jess was tired but elated. The rain stopped and the sun broke through like a promise.

They pushed on. Jess noticed that Kirk was hard in the way he handled the crew. Somehow the tall man stood alone and kept his distance, never joining in the good-natured banter, never a part of it. There were nine men in the crew, ten including Oldun.

As the days wore on, Jess learned that Oldun and three other small ranchers had pooled their money to buy the longhorns in Texas, where cattle were cheap. They had hired Kirk as trail boss, and he in turn had gathered the crew. Casey, the wrangler, told Jess about it. Casey was a bandy-legged Irishman who worked for Oldun.

"Kirk's been a drover since the war, and he knows his business. That's one reason they hired him. Another reason is that he's tough, and willing to fight for us."

"Against this fellow Bellamy?"

"Luther Bellamy. He was the first man in the valley, and he figures he owns it. He settled there with his wife and kid close to twenty years ago, but even his wife couldn't get along with him. She packed up and took the boy East with her, and she hasn't been back since."

"What's Bellamy's brand?"

"C in a circle," Casey said. "It's the biggest outfit in that part of Wyoming, and the small spreads have been having a time trying to buck him. There's free graze and gun law up there. Figure it out for yourself."

That wasn't hard. Jess realized that if Bellamy's plan to kill Kirk and Oldun had worked, the whole business would have gone to pot.

One evening when they met riding herd, Oldun told Jess as much. "I haven't said anything, Jess, but I admired the way you handled yourself in that Rockville saloon."

"I was plenty scared."

"So was I. Like Kirk said, that fellow was out to plug us for sure."

It made Jess feel close to the older man, and nerved him to say, "Will you be needing an extra hand when we reach the valley?"

Oldun was silent a moment. Then he said, "I figured you would stick with Kirk."

"He'll be moving on, won't he?"

"Not from what he told me. What he wants is to take cattle in lieu of wages, and start his own spread. That suits us fine, on account of we're low on cash. On top of that, it'll strengthen our position to have another man on our side."

Jess felt an odd glow of pleasure—why, he

didn't know, except that he admired Kirk. "Well, we'll see what happens when we get where we're going," he said.

"That's the way," Oldun agreed. "See you later." He rode away in the darkness.

They forded the South Platte and crossed into Wyoming below Cheyenne, then headed west toward the Green River mountains, making good time. The country was all Jess had dreamed it would be. It was sure enough cattle country, where a boy forked a horse before he could toddle.

It was hilly country now, with rolling stretches of grass and cottonwoods in the bottoms, where streams gurgled between sun-bleached boulders. The higher slopes were dark with timber. Down yonder, along that rise, the quaking aspens were pale green with spring. Come autumn they would turn golden yellow, and along about winter their leaves would change to silvery gray. They were like dancehall girls changing their skirts with the season, Jess thought, and grinned.

HE TURNED his head as Oldun rode up. The older man indicated a pass in the mountains before them.

"We're nearly home, Jess. We should push the herd through the pass about noon tomorrow. It's been a long trek."

Jess nodded absent-mindedly. Now that the drive was nearly finished, he wondered if he should hit Kirk up for a job. The tall man had scarcely spoken to him this past month, and then only to issue orders. Neither had he mentioned pay and, for all Jess knew, he was working only for his beans and bacon. It was a disconcerting stiuation, but Jess decided to do nothing about it until they reached the valley.

If Kirk paid him off, he could always move on, he thought. But then he remembered his stepfather's advice and knew he wouldn't unless he had to. He realized also that he was still unsure of himself, and that what faced him was somehow a test that might well shape his entire future.

The sun lowered behind the mountains and took daylight with it. Night fell quickly. During supper, Kirk said, "I want you all in the saddle tonight. Check your guns and ride with your rifles across the pommel. And if you hear riders, pass the word. I don't want to take any chances this late in the game."

It was a moonless night, but the stars were bright in the sky, and seemed close enough to pluck. The cattle were bedded down and quiet as Jess walked his horse along the far edge of the herd, head cocked, ears tuned to the night, eyes scanning the dark wedge of the pass.

Near midnight, he thought he heard the sound of hoofs, but he wasn't sure. He stopped his horse and listened hard, hands gripping his rifle. There it came again, the clop-clop-clop of walking horses. It was close, too close to warn even the nearest rider without firing and possibly starting a stampede.

Jess slid down and tied his horse to a bush, then ran forward at a crouch, a wild excitement clawing at his insides. There was a slight rise up ahead, and he bellied down below the rim.

From there he could see what appeared to be at least seven horsemen riding toward him. He waited until they were less than a dozen yards away before he rose to one knee and levered a shell into the chamber of his Winchester, knowing the sound of that would reach these men.

He called harshly, "Hold it right there! If one of you moves, we start shooting!"

The voice that answered was clear as a bell, yet somehow throaty. "It's Natalie Oldun. Is my father there?"

Jess hesitated. It was a girl's voice all right, but still it could be a trap. "Let's have a look at you," Jess said.

"For heaven's sake!" the girl said, and rode forward.

Jess rose cautiously. A moment later she drew even with him, and he saw the pale blur of her face.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

"Never mind that," Jess said. "You ride on in. I'm fixing to watch these fellows until Mr. Oldun comes back and says all right."

"Why, you fool, these are Pop's partners!" she said angrily.

"Don't give me an argument. Just do as I tell you."

She leaned down. Beneath the brim of her hat he could see a small, tanned face and hair the color of honey. "I don't even recog-

nize you," she said sharply. "You weren't a member of the crew that left here."

From the corner of his eye Jess saw the other riders move forward, and he told them to stop in their tracks. Then he looked at the girl and said harshly, "Are you going in or not?"

"You blamed fool," she said, and rode on toward the herd.

A minute later he heard her call out to someone else, and five minutes after that she and Oldun rode up. Oldun was chuckling.

"My girl here didn't take to the way you treated her, Jess, but you did right. They could have been Bellamy and his bunch." He went on to talk to the other riders, calling out names cheerfully.

Jess went back and climbed aboard his horse. When he turned the animal, Natalie said, "It's a wonder you didn't take a shot at me."

"What'd you expect me to do? Let you ride in without trying to stop you?"

"I expected you to take notice when I spoke up, not act suspicious as all get-out."

"Bosh," Jess said. "You have no business here anyhow. A kid like you ought to be home in bed."

"Don't call me a kid!" she said. "I'm probably older than you."

"How old?" Jess asked, grinning.

"Seventeen, that's how old!"

"Why'd you folks come out here?"

"To put on a show of strength. Bellamy hired extra riders this week, and we fear he might try to stop us from pushing the herd into the valley."

THE others came up then, and Dan Oldun said, "You should've stayed home, Nat. Didn't your mother try to stop you?"

Jess saw the girl's teeth flash in a grin. "She was asleep."

"Well, you go on back. There might be trouble, and I don't want you here. Scoot, now."

"But, Pop—"

"Get going. And tell your Ma I'll see her tomorrow."

The girl made a sound of exasperation, then neck-reined her horse and trotted in the direction of the pass. Oldun turned to the others.

"Pete, I think it'd be a good idea if you and Art stand guard up there, just in case. One of you can ride back in case you hear riders coming. The rest of us can spread out here and wait it out." He turned his head and spat. "How many men do you figure Bellamy has on hand?"

"Fifteen, eighteen," one of the men said.

"Then we have as many, so maybe he won't try anything—not tonight, anyhow. All right, let's spread out."

The rest of that night seemed endless to Jess. Though he was fully alert, his mind kept swinging off on a tangent to Natalie Oldun. It seemed he could still hear her throaty voice, and he wondered how she would look to him in the daylight. Finally dawn spread thin across the sky, the stars faded, and the first sunlight flamed in the east. Coffee and bacon smells drifted from the chuck wagon.

After a hurried breakfast, they started the final leg of the drive. Jess was mounting his horse when Kirk came over. "I want you with me today, kid. I'm thinking we're gonna run into trouble." He grinned suddenly. "Let's see how fast you are." His hand streaked for his gun.

He had it half out of its holster when he found himself looking into the muzzle of Jess's Navy Colt. Slowly he let his gun slide back, an odd tightness around his narrowed eyes.

"Fast enough," he said briefly, and rode away.

The sun was at high noon when they topped the rim of the pass. Besides Jess, there was Kirk and Oldun and Pete Kennedy, Oldun's nearest neighbor, and Art Dadar and his son Jack, and Tom Faber. Kennedy, Art Dadar, Faber and Oldun were the four who held the equal shares in the herd of Texas longhorns.

Kennedy, a chunky man, spat a stream of tobacco juice. "If they show, it'll be from that way."

Jess looked where he pointed down the long slope, but he saw only the yellowish haze of distance. The valley—if it were a valley—opened before them as far as the eye could see. Low on the horizon, vaguely shimmer-

ing, stretched a chain of mountains that, to Jess, seemed at least a hundred miles away. Between, the land was restless, never still, broken here and there by series of low hills and little parks.

Jess shifted in the saddle. He looked once more across the slope as they rode ahead, and saw the leafy tops of cottonwood trees rising above a depression. He could see them quite clearly, and he looked away from them and then back again—and saw a doe dart from cover.

He leaned forward, eyes squinting, and saw the head and shoulders of one rider come in view, then another. "Is that them?" He pointed. "There in that draw?"

Oldun shaded his eyes, muttered. "I couldn't miss that black gelding if I tried."

Luther Bellamy came forward at a trot, flanked on either side by two riders. Art Dadar, a grizzled oldster, spat and said, "It isn't like him to come without all his crew. Do you reckon he's just feeling us out?"

"We'll find out soon enough," Oldun said.

They turned to meet the five riders.

A minute later, Jess saw that one of them was Otis. He glanced at Kirk. Kirk appeared to be looking straight ahead, but he must've caught Jess's inquiring glance from the corner of his eye, for he nodded.

"The cub changed sides."

The rider to Bellamy's right was the Trinidad Kid, and the next man was Lew. The fifth man, an ordinary cowpoke from the looks of him, was a stranger to Jess.

BELLAMY reined in and sat stiffly in the saddle, his eyes ranging from one man to the next. "Loaded for bear, I see. A regular ripsnorter of an outfit! Four brands and a mangy herd of longhorns. You figure they'll fatten enough to sell?"

He was an enormous man, thick-bodied, with a heavy face and meaty lips that were stretched now in a cheerful grin. Salt-and-pepper hair grew low on his neck. His small eyes were set close together, close to the thick bridge of a nose that had been broken. His black serge trousers were taut at the thighs and, despite the mild spring weather, he wore a black-and-white cowhide coat buttoned to the throat.

Oldun said, "We figure they'll fatten."

"On my grass, huh?" Luther Bellamy's laugh rumbled in his chest. Then, suddenly, he looked straight at Jess and pointed at him with a thick finger. Is that the snotnose that spoiled my party? Speak up, one of you!"

The Trinidad Kid had a bandage around his right wrist. He glanced at it and said sullenly, "That's him."

"What? A schoolboy, still wet behind the ears! I'll lay odds on it! And you mean to sit there and tell me you let him take you?"

Lew cleared his throat. "We didn't know he was in it, boss."

Bellamy threw his head back and let go a short burst of laughter. "I'll be damned!"

Kirk said softly, "It isn't that funny, old man. And you were wrong about there being four brands. There are five."

"Five, is it? And where do you fit in, friend? Where do you aim to settle?"

"The old Larner place."

"Oh?" Luther Bellamy said. The cheerfulness vanished from his lips, and they pressed firmly together. "I'll remind you, friend, that when Larner pulled out I took over his graze."

Kirk took tobacco from his shirt pocket and rolled a smoke before saying quietly, "He had title to a quarter section, and I bought it from him. On top of that, I'm taking what free grass he claimed as his."

"Damn the quarter section! And damn the law that says you own it." Luther Bellamy jabbed his chest. "Around here I'm the law, and don't any of you forget it! Keep to your side of the creek or I'll run the bunch of you out of the country. If I ever catch one of those mangy longhorns in with my Herefords, he won't live to reach market. And longhorns aren't all I'm talking about, if you get my meaning."

"We got it back in Rockville," Kirk said flatly. "And I for one didn't take to it." He glanced briefly at the fifth man. "Next time make it stick, or I'll come gunning for you, old man. Not for your tinhorn gunslingers, but for you. Is that clear?"

"Ah!" Bellamy breathed, and reached for his reins. "I can feel the way the wind's blowing, and there's a storm coming for sure. Lightning'll flash and thunder'll roar! And

sure as hell I'll be riding a bolt of that lightning, so when the time comes, either get your feet wet or stay under cover."

He stared at Kirk with cold violence, then shifted his gaze to Jess. "You made a mistake coming here, snotnose. Neither man nor boy bests me or mine, and I'm not forgetting. If you want to live to reach voting age, clear out."

Jess, his heart hammering, said, "Old man, you talk too much."

Blood darkened Bellamy's face, but again he laughed. "You're fast on the trigger in more ways than one, huh? But just remember that the Kid's arm is about healed, and there's plenty of room left in Boot Hill for the likes of you." He lowered his voice. "Yeah, remember it—all of you remember it." He wheeled his horse around. "And don't ever forget it!"

He rode back the way he had come, the others strung out behind him.

THEY pushed the herd onto Oldun's grass by nightfall, and next morning early they started to take tally, to split the herd four ways. Kirk collected his cut of thirty head from each man, and when it was all finished the trail hands were paid off. Natalie rode out from the ranch house late that afternoon, as the men were getting ready to head for town.

Jess, every inch of him covered with dust and sweat, was surprised when she rode straight up to him and said soberly, "I'm sorry for the way I snapped at you the other night. I didn't know then what I know now —that you saved Pop from getting shot."

Jess's heart pounded queerly. "It's not worth mentioning."

"Pop's life is too worth mentioning!" she flashed. Then she grinned. "There I go, snapping again."

She was even prettier than he'd made himself believe. And though her pert face was still that of a mischievous girl, the way she filled her dungarees and cotton shirt showed that she was ripening to healthy womanhood.

She smiled at him and continued, "You're really kind of shy, aren't you?"

She was not badgering him, or anything like that, but just quiet and friendly. It made him feel callow and at a loss. He said lamely, "I ain't—haven't been around girls much."

She pursed her lips. "Would you like to come to supper tonight?"

Kirk rode over before Jess could answer. The tall man grinned slowly at the girl and said, "Well! You sure grew up while we were gone. Next thing you know I'll be around sitting on your front porch."

"I'll bet!" she said, and wrinkled her nose at him.

"Why, sure," Kirk said softly. "Then on Saturday nights we'll attend the dances roundabout and have ourselves a time."

"You're joking," Natalie said. "I don't like men who make jokes." She turned to Jess. "Well?"

"Not tonight, honey," Kirk said, having obviously overheard her invitation. "The kid's coming to town with us. Bellamy said he was still wet behind the ears, so we have to do something about it for sure."

"I can imagine," she said, sniffing. Then she turned her horse and rode away.

Kirk looked after her. "Nice," he murmured. "Real nice." He smiled mockingly at Jess. "Would you rather have supper with her, kid?"

"I'd as soon go to town."

"Then get over there to the creek with the rest of the boys and wash the scum off. I'll be waiting."

Washing, Jess had a moment of regret for not having spoken up at Natalie's invitation. Then he thought of town and felt a stirring of excitement. Tonight he'd ask. Tonight he'd know for sure if he would make a top hand on Kirk's crew.

PINE was no different from many of the cow towns they had passed along the trail. There were the same false-fronted frame buildings and saloons. Jess sat at a back table with a glass of beer He had thirty dollars in wages in his pocket now, but he hadn't yet asked Kirk for a steady job. Talk flowed around him, and somehow he felt out of it. Most of the crew were veterans of the trail, and he guessed that now they'd been paid off they would drift on to other jobs.

Cash Corey, a lanky man with a pock-

marked face, said, "I sure ain't going south this summer—it's too hot. I might try it out Montana way. I'll buy an outfit and do some prospecting for a change, maybe strike it rich."

"This is the place to strike it rich," Kirk said, from where he was playing poker. He flipped a silver dollar into the pot. "That business of squatting beside a stream and panting for dust isn't for me. I'll sink my money in beef every time."

Minor Dow, a stocky man of fifty, said in a dreamy way, "There were times during the war when I'd've shot my best buddy for a slice of beef. It's hard to believe now."

"Remember how it was in Texas right afterward? Everything was shot to hell. Me and a couple of other boys made a living running mavericks across the border. Man, those *senoritas!* Have you ever been in old Mexico, Kirk?"

"Lot's of times. I fought in one of their revolutions. General Kirk, and that's a fact!" He laughed. "Man, that was when I ate high on the hog."

"You really aim to settle here?"

"That's right."

"You haven't much of a start. You're gonna be powerful hungry before ever you drive a load of beef to the railhead."

"I'll make out." Kirk glanced at Jess, his grin crooked. "Yeah, I'll make out," he repeated. "A railroad will be coming through here one day, and when it does I aim to fill those cattle cars full of Target beef."

"That your brand?"

"That's my brand," Kirk said.

Minor Dow and Cash Corey glanced at each other. Then Dow said, his voice low, "That's rubbing shoulders with C in a circle, isn't it?" He looked at Kirk.

"Is it?" Kirk shrugged. "I never gave it a thought. Funny, isn't it?"

Jess idly dipped a finger in his beer and drew a C in a circle on the table. He looked at it a second, then made a circle of the C, so that now he had a circle within a circle. He rubbed it out absently, wishing he had accepted Natalie's invitation to supper. It was an hour later that Kirk pushed his chair back and wandered over, the stub of a cigar between his teeth.

"Did Oldun offer you a job?"

"No."

"All right. If you want a job, I'll give you one. Thirty and found, and more if things work out."

"I'll take it."

"Tomorrow's Sunday. Better go buy some new duds for yourself before the stores close." Kirk headed for the bar.

The big mercantile was still open, and doing a brisk business. Jess made his purchases and was ready to leave, when he saw Natalie Oldun at the dry goods counter. She had tossed a length of flowered pattern material over one shoulder and was studying the effect in a mirror, her head cocked to one side, when she saw Jess coming up behind her.

When she turned he smiled and said, "How was supper?"

She regarded him coolly: "Do you care?"

He frowned. She was snapping at him again. "Sure I care. I was wishing just a while ago that I'd accepted your invitation."

"You could have said so instead of jumping through a hoop when Kirk made up your mind for you."

He flushed. "You have it all wrong. I was half thinking of going in with the boys in the first place, because I wanted to ask Kirk for a job."

"Did you ask him?"

"He just got through offering me one."

"That's nice."

He shook his head at her. "You sure like to jump on people, don't you?"

"I just didn't like the way he planned your evening," she said. Then she smiled. "You can come out tomorrow if you like. Dinner's at one."

"I'll be there."

When he got back to the saloon, he told Kirk about it. The tall man shrugged and said in an annoyed way, "All right, all right. I figured we'd push the herd to my place tomorrow, but I guess Cash and Dow and I can handle it.

"Did you hire them, too?"

"Yeah."

"Seems like a lot of men to handle a few cows."

Kirk regarded him with narrowed eyes.

Then he sighed. "Look, sonny, I'm paying the wages, so suppose you also let me do the worrying, huh?"

"I didn't mean—" Jess began.

"Yeah. And if you don't like it you can quit before you start."

Jess stared at him. He said hotly, "I don't want to quit! All I was saying—"

"Forget it," Kirk told him. He grinned suddenly, punched Jess playfully in the belly. "Maybe a home-cooked meal'll do you good after all those beans. Come on, I'll buy you a drink."

WHEN JESS arrived at Oldun's next day, he learned that the dinner was in the order of a celebration. There were other guests—Kennedy with his wife and two children, Dader and his son, and Tom Faber and his family. Jess met Mrs. Oldun, a large, pleasant-faced woman, and he took to her right away. Natalie, in a green print dress, her golden hair in braids and laughter on her lips, seemed like no other girl Jess had ever seen, and he couldn't take his eyes off her.

During dinner, Oldun said, "Nat tells me you hired on with Kirk."

"That's right. He hired Cash and Dow, too."

Faber laughed. "One man could run that spread of his. He's setting his sights mighty high."

"I reckon he's remembering what Bellamy said," Kennedy remarked. "Alone, he wouldn't stand a chance against the big fellow."

Oldun put his fork down on his plate. "That isn't the way to look at it, Pete. The bunch of us have to stick together. Here's how I look at it: Art here's on Bellamy's south boundary, and if the man makes trouble for him we should all jump in and back Art. Isn't that what we've been saying all along?"

"I guess I wasn't thinking about Kirk being one of us," Kennedy said. "But you're right, Dan. If I know Bellamy, he isn't finished with us by a long shot, and if we have to fight him we'd better stick together."

"I agree with that," Jack Dader said. Art Dader's son was built stocky, like his father, square-faced and with a head of curly brown hair. He was about twenty, deliberate and slow-moving, and Jess had liked his looks at first meeting. "If we stand by while the other feller's getting it, we're done for."

"Well, we all have twice the beef now that we had," Oldun said, "and that's gonna make a difference. It's money in the bank, boys. Let's drink a toast on it!"

After dinner, while the women washed dishes, the men went out and pitched horseshoes and the children romped and played. Jess asked Oldun the way to the old Larner place. Then he thanked Mrs. Oldun for having him as a guest. He was saddling his horse at the corral when Natalie came up.

She smiled and said, "Did you have a good time, Jess?"

"You bet," he said, grinning.

"I'm glad you're going to stay in the valley. Could you come again next Sunday? We could go riding after dinner. I know where there's a cave that has all sorts of Indian writing on the walls."

"Where's that?"

"Up a canyon in the hills."

"I'll sure make it if I can."

She moved closer to him. His face felt flushed and his hands were clumsy as he leaned over to tighten the cinch.

"Jess?" she murmured, and when he raised his head she kissed him quickly on the side of his mouth, then stepped back, smiling unsteadily. "That's because of what you did for Pop."

He swallowed, his face red. "Best reward I ever had."

They walked slowly across the yard, Jess leading his horse, his boots scuffing at the ground. Shouts and laughter came from the men pitching horseshoes; the women hushed their gossip on the veranda as Jess and Natalie came in sight.

"Well," she murmured, "I hope you can make it Sunday."

"I'll sure try."

They smiled shyly at each other. Finally Jess said, "I'd better get going." He swung into leather. "So long."

"Bye, Jess."

NEAR sundown, he found Kirk's cattle grazing in a glade, one slope of which abounded in live oaks, while well along

the down slope cottonwoods and willows bordered a shallow creek.

The smell of woodsmoke was in the air. On a bench in the trees he saw the house, a pole corral and a lean-to-shed. The house was a box-like structure of unpainted boards and a crude fireplace, from which smoke rose and vanished in the twilight breeze. Kirk came to the door to say that supper was on the stove.

"We're eating and hitting the hay. There's lots of work staring us in the face tomorrow."

There were only two bunks in the house, and that night Jess spread his blankets on the floor. Next morning, early, the four men rode out and scouted Kirk's domain to check fences, water and graze. Kirk went to town in the afternoon and bought a work wagon and a team of mules, and he drove back with a load of lumber, wire and tools.

Jess and Dow built two extra bunks before dark, and Cash cooked supper. They talked of this and that while they ate. Jess said, "According to Bellamy, he took over this spread. How come we didn't see any of his cattle today?"

Kirk explained that Bellamy had moved most of his beef to high country the previous week. "All his longhorn stock, that is. That figures close to eight thousand head. His Herefords he keeps in a pasture by themselves, but he has no more than maybe three hundred head of 'em."

Jess mentioned the talk at Oldun's table, about the small ranchers sticking together. Kirk listened, his face oddly impatient.

But all he said was, "Good idea. Bellamy's due to make a move sooner or later. Wonder who he'll hit first?"

It seemed to Jess that Kirk's attitude was somehow mocking. But then maybe that was Kirk's way of meeting a situation. It was hard to tell. If he was in sympathy with the others, he had a strange way of showing it, Jess thought.

They spent three days fixing fence, and on Friday were hard at work enlarging the corral, when a voice hailed them. A rider splashed across the creek, leading what appeared to be a pack horse. Kirk tugged at the brim of his hat to shade his eyes.

"That's Andy," he muttered. Andy was Dader's hired man. "That's no pack horse he's leading. There's a body across the saddle!"

They ran forward as Andy pounded up the slope at a trot. "It's Jack, they got Jack!" Andy yelled. He pulled rein, an expression of stunned dismay riding his creased face. "Three of 'em jumped us at Bellamy's south fence. It was that fellow Otis. He put the barb in Jack, calling him names and cussing him and his old man until Jack couldn't take any more. He slapped a hand to his gun, and Otis shot him out of the saddle."

Jess looked at the body and felt sick, remembering that only last Sunday he had sat across the table from Jack Dader. He said, "Where's Art? Wasn't he at the house?"

"He went to town this morning. That man'll go crazy when he finds out."

"So Bellamy drew blood," Kirk said softly.

"Maybe it was just Otis," Jess said, not certain. "Maybe he saw a chance to rile somebody, and he did it."

Kirk made an impatient gesture. "It still goes back to Bellamy, regardless. Hitch up the wagon, Dow. I never did like the sight of a man face down across a saddle."

THEY buried Jack Dader next day. A small crowd surrounded the grave, silent and grief-stricken. Art Dader, his face chalky, emptied the first shovelful of earth onto the coffin. Then he turned away blindly, mounted his horse and rode toward the hills. Just as silently, the others turned from the grave and went to their rigs and horses.

Oldun spoke in a low, angry voice. "There was a time, when I was set against shooting and killing. But the way I feel now, it'd be a pleasure."

His wife took his arm. "Stop that sort of talk! Only the mean ones take pleasure in killing."

Jess walked with Natalie to their buckboard. She had cried, and now she looked at him with swollen lids, but he noticed sparks of anger in her eyes.

She said, "They called it self-defense, but I don't believe it. Jack was good and kind, and Otis was just the opposite. Stay away from Otis, Jess. Pop says he has a grudge against you, and he's not to be trusted."

"I never was one to look for trouble."

She squeezed his hand. "You be careful."

He helped her to the seat and walked to his horse. Kirk, Cash and Dow had already mounted. As Jess swung up, Kirk said casually, "He's over at the saloon."

Jess glanced at him and said nothing.

"Drinking and bragging," Kirk went on. "He isn't alone, though." He paused, looked from one man to the next. "Did I hear one of you say that we ought to get us a drink?"

"I'm not in the mood," Jess said shortly.

Kirk grinned tightly, and mockery edged his voice. "Maybe it's best. Like Bellamy said, 'Get your feet wet or stay under cover.' I don't blame you, kid. You'd better wait at the hotel while we wet our tonsils."

Jess flushed. Eyes blazing, he said, "I'm not ducking for cover, if that's what you're getting at."

He glanced at Cash and Dow, but all he saw in their faces was impassive curiosity. Anger flickered in him, knocking aside the barrier of Natalie's words. He touched his horse with a spur.

"Let's go!"

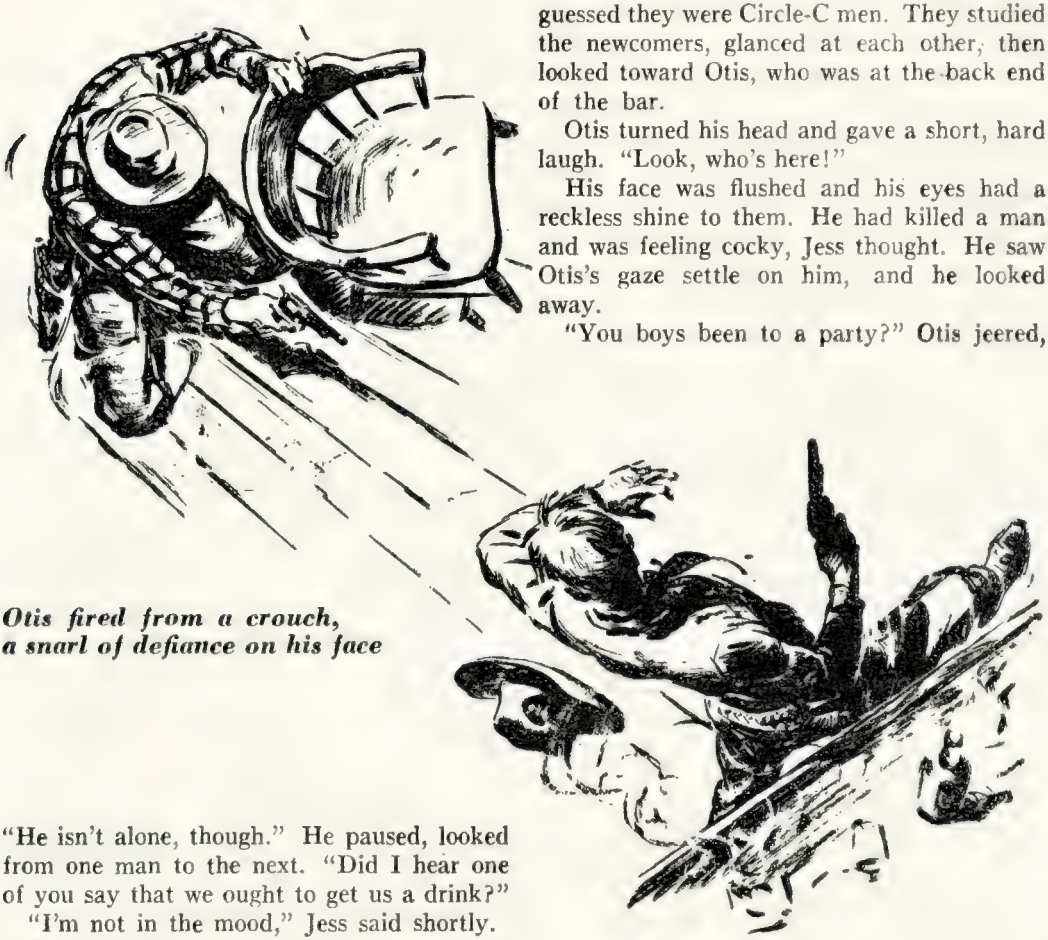
In town, Jess looped reins around the hitch rack, he decided that after one drink he'd leave. He wanted no trouble with Otis; he had only wanted to prove to Kirk that he was not afraid. They went inside. There were half a dozen cowpokes at the tables, and Jess guessed they were Circle-C men. They studied the newcomers, glanced at each other, then looked toward Otis, who was at the back end of the bar.

Otis turned his head and gave a short, hard laugh. "Look, who's here!"

His face was flushed and his eyes had a reckless shine to them. He had killed a man and was feeling cocky, Jess thought. He saw Otis's gaze settle on him, and he looked away.

"You boys been to a party?" Otis jeered, and started along the bar toward them, his gaze still on Jess. "Well, if it isn't the son who plugged the Trinidad Kid when he wasn't looking!"

Jess caught Kirk's brief glance in the bar mirror, but he didn't know what to say, so he kept silent. No one else had spoken or made a move. He wished he had stayed outside, for he sensed suddenly that, if anything



Otis fired from a crouch, a snarl of defiance on his face

happened, it would be between him and Otis. It was almost as if this meeting had been planned.

"Yeah, this son was damn lucky, and now he has everybody thinking he's fast with his gun. But I've been wondering just how fast he really is, and if at bottom he has a yellow streak." Otis laughed again. "Look at him, drinking whisky like a man."

Jess still said nothing. He knew why Otis hated him. It was because, back at Rockville, Otis had backed out of tangling with the Trinidad Kid. He had been afraid, and had as much as admitted it. Then Kirk had fired him, and that must have stung. But now that he had killed a man, and had a few drinks under his belt, he felt courageous enough to try to wipe out the memory of his cowardice.

But Jess didn't want trouble with him. He felt certain in his mind that he was faster with a gun than Otis, but that didn't matter. It seemed he had always known instinctively that he was fast on the draw, from the time he was twelve and play-acted at being a gunfighter with other kids around town.

"Yeah, yellow," Otis jeered. He stood about ten feet away, and as Jess glanced at him now, he crouched and slapped his hand against the butt of his gun. Then he laughed.

Jess didn't move. He sensed that Otis wasn't set to draw—not yet, anyhow. He finished his drink and turned his back.

"Look at him," Otis said contemptuously. And then, with a sudden burst of rage, "Damn it, look at me when I talk to you!"

Jess eased away from the bar. "Let's go," he said to Kirk.

Otis came around to get between him and the door. He said in a nasty way, "I want you on your knees before you go, sonny."

Kirk said sharply, "You gonna take that from him?"

Jess flushed. "I'm not looking for trouble."

Someone laughed. Kirk said, "I'll be damned." He walked away, Cash and Dow behind him.

Jess started to follow, and just then Otis again slapped his hand against his gun butt. But this time he drew it. "I said on your knees!"

He stood with the long barrel of his gun pointed down, and sneered at Jess. "You yellow sidewinder, what does it take to rile you?"

Jess suddenly had had enough. As he turned, his arm blurred. Otis had only to raise his gun, but he was too slow. The bullet ripped it out of his hand, and he stood there slack-jawed, blinking at Jess.

Jess holstered the Navy Colt. "Pick up your gun and get out of here." He turned back to the bar.

Otis moved slowly to where his gun lay, near the door. He glanced at Jess's back, then bent to pick up the gun.

"Jess!"

Jess's sinewy body twisted as Kirk shouted the warning, and the Navy Colt appeared in his hand as Otis fired from a crouch, a snarl of defiance on his face.

The bullet tore through the bar near Jess. Before Otis could fire a second time, Jess shot him through the forehead.

Someone swore softly in the stunned silence. Jess, feeling sick at his stomach, took a trembling breath as he holstered his gun.

He scarcely heard Kirk saying, "That does it, kid. From now on Bellamy will know where he stands."

JESS did not go to Oldun's for dinner next day. He knew he was shamed to face them, and he had half a notion that he wouldn't be welcome. He remembered what Natalie had said about keeping away from Otis, what her mother had said about only the mean ones enjoying killing. He'd had no alternative but to shoot Otis in self-defense, yet he somehow felt guilty about it just the same.

The men spent Sunday working around the ranch house. Kirk said he wouldn't be surprised if Bellamy showed up with his crew. "He can't afford to take this sitting down, and he knows it. From now on we'd better watch ourselves, and stick together."

Jess began to notice a difference in the way Cash and Dow regarded him. Before this, they had treated him in an off-hand sort of way, but after the shooting they showed him a certain wary respect devoid of real friendliness. It was as if at any moment they

expected him to turn against them.

Only Kirk didn't change. And if he were worried about what Bellamy would do in retaliation for the shooting, he didn't show it. For all that, Jess often caught a bemused expression on Kirk's high-boned face, as if the tall man were wrestling with thoughts too secret to divulge.

At noon on Wednesday, Art Dader rode into the yard. His face was weary and drawn, his voice toneless as he spoke to Jess at the corral.

"I heard about the shooting, and I reckon it's worth a vote of thanks. I've been camping in the hills, trying to make sense out of going after the fellow myself."

"I didn't kill him on purpose."

"You gave him a chance, which is probably more than he gave Jack," Dader said. "I don't think I would've done the same."

Jess stared at the stocky man. He understood suddenly that Dader thought he had gone to the saloon with the idea of killing Otis. "I meant it when I said I didn't go looking for trouble."

"He's dead, and it makes me feel easier," Dader said, as though he hadn't heard. Without another word, he turned his horse and rode away.

It was the next day. They were stringing wire across the mouth of a box canyon when Luther Bellamy and his crew rode out of the trees toward them.

Kirk dropped his hammer and said softly, "This'll be it, boys—a showdown, if I ever saw one." Excitement was in his voice, as if he had been looking forward to this moment eagerly.

There were twelve of them, Jess saw. He recognized the Trinidad Kid, and saw that the gunfighter no longer wore a bandage around his wrist. They came on riding stirrup to stirrup, Bellamy a little in the lead as though his pride demanded it, and there was nothing cheerful now in his heavy face.

"There he is." He drew rein, his hard eyes boring into Jess's face. "The same snotnose that spoiled the broth before! Kill one of my own, will you? Snotnose, your grave's been dug, and you'll be in it by this time tomorrow. Stand to one side and drop your gun!"

Jess didn't move. He looked carefully along the line of men, then fastened his gaze on the Trinidad Kid, who, at a nod from Bellamy, swung out of the saddle and handed his reins to Lew.

Kirk said harshly, "Hold it!" And then, "What's your beef, old man? You had one of ours killed, and we evened the score. Isn't that about the size of it?"

"You haven't changed your talking ways, have you?" Bellamy said. "Now I'll tell you the size of it! From now on I'm running this show, and you've camped on my grass long enough. You have an hour to pack your gear and clear out, hear me? Now get on your way, or get packed out of here across a saddle!" His eyes flashed to Jess. "And that doesn't include you, snotnose!"

Jess ignored him. He was watching the Trinidad Kid, who had circled behind the line of horses and now stood looking at him from a distance of ten feet away.

The men were quiet now, and Jess could feel their eyes on him. He knew then that nothing could stop it, and something within him trembled and then became still. He looked carefully at the Trinidad Kid.

There was nothing much to see on that hatchet face. Then Bellamy said suddenly, "Blast him!" The hatchet face tightened, and a corner of the taut mouth jerked.

It was a small sign, scarcely discernible, but it was enough. Jess saw the other's shoulder dip, saw the Kid's hand blur as he himself went for his gun. He felt the Navy Colt buck against his palm, at the same moment that something smashed his chest. His world spun. He tried desperately to stay erect. He thought he heard a hoarse roar of rage, and then another shot, and then he slipped forward into darkness.

HE WOKE up to darkness and to pain, and for a panic-stricken moment thought he had gone blind. He tried to move, and felt the bandages tight around his chest and shoulder. Then he heard someone rise from one of the other bunks, and then light from a lamp brightened the room. He blinked at an old man whose face was covered with white beard stubble.

"Where am I?" Jess said weakly.

"Don't you know, boy?"

"I can't remember."

"You're right in your own bunk, boy," the old man said. "You got shot up a little yesterday, but you'll make it. Now go back to sleep."

It seemed to Jess that he fell asleep before the old man had finished speaking. For five days and nights he was caught in the stupor of sleep, and was aware only in a vague way that at times he woke up and the old man fed him. Twice someone changed his bandages, hurting him, but even the pain seemed far away and unimportant. He lay unmoving and uncaring as time passed over him.

On the sixth day he felt the sun on his face, and his mind cleared. He turned his head and watched the old man puttering at the stove.

He said, "Who are you?"

"Call me Koller," the old man said.

"What happened?"

"I wasn't here."

"You must've heard," Jess said.

"I heard," Koller admitted. "You killed that feller. Got him plumb center, just as he shot you."

Jess stared at the ceiling as it all came back to him in a rush. "What else?" he asked.

"Kirk killed Bellamy."

So that was the shot he had heard before he passed out. Bellamy was dead. Neither the old man's nor the Trinidad Kid's death seemed to mean anything one way or the other.

"What happened after that?"

"Kirk sent for the doc," Koller said gruffly. "A bullet caught you high in the chest, but it was a clean wound, and didn't touch the lungs."

"I mean, what happened? Where's Kirk?"

"He'll be back in a day or so, most likely," Koller said. "Ask him what happened."

Jess saw that Koller had no mind to talk about it, so he didn't press his questions on the old man. But if Kirk was gone, so were Cash and Dow, and Jess couldn't help but become restless with wonder.

Three days later, around noon, he awoke and found Kirk sitting watching him. Kirk hadn't shaved lately, and his face was drawn, his eyes red from lack of sleep. He said, "How're you feeling?"

"Pretty fair. Where've you been?"

A hard grin stretched Kirk's mouth and then was gone. "Working day and night. Did the old man tell you what happened?"

"He said you killed Bellamy."

Kirk rolled a cigarette. "That's right. He almost busted a gut when you dropped the Trinidad Kid. He went for his gun, so I put a slug in him."

"Then what? Didn't the rest of 'em put up a fight?"

"Not after that. Seeing Bellamy drop took all the fight out of 'em. So I had a little talk with 'em, and all but two finally saw things my way."

Jess frowned. "What way is that?"

Kirk studied his cigarette. He said carefully, "When a man sees his chance he has to take it, kid. I saw mine and I took it. That crew of Bellamy's were only working for wages. So, since it's no skin off their noses as to who pays 'em, I got 'em to work for me."

"All of 'em? But you don't have the cattle."

"Didn't have," Kirk interrupted impatiently. "What do you think we've been doing all week, playing leapfrog?"

"What *have* you been doing?"

Kirk grinned. "You don't know much about cattle country, do you, kid? Listen. When something happens to a fellow like Bellamy, it's each man for himself. Who owns those cattle of his now that he's dead?"

"His kin."

"What kin?" Kirk said, annoyed. "The wife and son that might well be dead themselves, as far as anyone knows? Now you listen. He had three big herds up there in the high meadows, and we're getting ours like everybody else. Already the nesters up there are cutting into his beef, not to mention the starvation spreads that are getting fat." He blew a stream of smoke and squinted through it at Jess in a mocking way. "Get what I mean?"

Jess was bewildered. "Yeah," he said uneasily, "but it doesn't seem right."

"Doesn't it?" Kirk said shortly. "You'd better think twice about that, kid. This past week we put my brand on over a thousand head, and tomorrow we're driving half of 'em across the county line, where I have a buyer waiting who's willing to pay thirty dollars a head. That'll come to fifteen thousand, kid.

Now do you see what I mean by grabbing your chance? Any other way, it would've taken me ten years to get where I am now."

"That doesn't make it right."

"What are you, a Sunday school kid? What do you think would happen to *my* cattle if I got killed? I'll tell you what—every man able to fork a horse would be out taking his cut. You think those cowpokes of Bellamy's didn't have it in mind when I popped the old man? They did. And they're getting their cut, too.

"That's the way it goes, kid—dog eat dog. If you don't get it, someone else will. And once you've got it and are in the driver's seat, you can give the orders." He paused. "Take you. A couple of months ago you were cleaning stalls. Now you're worth something." He grinned. "Yeah, that's right. I'm seeing to it that you get your cut, too. So don't worry about a thing."

Kirk went out after that, and Jess heard him riding away from the house. He tried to think over what he had learned, and he had to admit reluctantly that in a way Kirk was right. Still, it was wrong for a man to take what didn't belong to him, and he felt sure that a man like Oldun, for instance, wouldn't have touched a head of Circle-C beef. But he felt too tired and disinterested to worry about it now. A minute later he was asleep.

IT WAS another week before Jess felt strong enough to sit in the sunshine. Then he stayed an hour, and returned to bed thoroughly exhausted. Kirk came in with part of the crew the following morning, but the men stayed only long enough to wash and eat before heading toward town.

It was not yet noon when Oldun, Kennedy, Dader and Tom Faber rode in. Jess was sitting up in bed. He heard Koller saying gruffly, "He isn't here."

"Is Jess inside?"

"Asleep," Koller said.

Jess called out, "It's all right, Mr. Oldun. Come on in."

Oldun came in, followed by the others. He asked Jess how he was feeling, and Jess said all right. Jess grinned, happy to see these men again, but he sensed soon enough that they had something on their minds. After a while Oldun mentioned what it was.

"We came to have a talk with Kirk. We know he's been cutting into Circle-C beef, and that's his business, and we want no part of it. But, with Bellamy gone, we have a right to share what grass and water he claimed as his. Did Kirk say anything to you about it?"

"No."

"Well, Art here started moving some stock across, and Kirk's boys were there to stop him. It isn't right. It's no more right than what Bellamy did when he was alive."

Jess didn't know what to say to that. He thought perhaps Kirk meant to hold a meeting to decide who should get what graze, before letting any beef cross the boundary. That seemed logical.

He said, "I don't know what to tell you, Mr. Oldun. So I guess you'd all better wait and talk to Kirk."

Oldun grunted. "Well, then, we might as well get going." The others went out to their horses, but Oldun lingered. "Nat asked me to give you her best. She'll be glad to hear you're feeling better."

Jess swallowed. "That's nice."

"She was kind of upset because you didn't come around that Sunday she invited you." He paused, then added abruptly, "Did you stay away because you shot Otis?"

"That was it."

"I figured so. You were wrong, Jess. We heard what happened, and how you tried to keep from fighting him. But a man can only take so much without branding himself a coward. And if you hadn't stood up to him, you would never again have been welcome in my house. You can believe me when I say that." He touched Jess's shoulder and went out.

When Kirk returned after dark, Jess told him of the visit. Kirk grunted and pulled off his boots. "All right, so what?"

"Did you tell the crew to keep Art's stock across the line?"

"That's right."

"But why?"

Kirk said irritably, "Because if I let one move in, they'll all move in. Next thing you know they'll be squatting on my doorstep."

"That's not so, and you know it," Jess said. "I figured you first wanted to hold a meeting."

"All right, all right." Kirk tossed his shirt and jeans on a chair and crawled into his bunk.

"Isn't that what you had in mind?" Jess asked.

Kirk yawned. "Look, kid, I haven't had a good night's sleep in a week, so kindly shut up." He turned his face to the wall.

Jess lay in silence until Koller came inside and went to bed. He didn't like his thoughts, and he dodged justifying them. But still, he had to admit that Kirk had changed. Troubled, he fell asleep. When he awoke next morning, Kirk had already gone.

Two days later the doctor came for the last time. "It's healed nicely," he said. "You're young and healthy, and that makes a difference. Another week ought to see you up and around. But don't fork a horse too soon."

It seemed to Jess that he gained strength with each passing hour. He was hungry most of the time, and had Koller grumbling, "You've been eating more than any three men I ever cooked for."

Jess grinned. "You know your way around a stove. Where'd you work before this?"

"Why, I was with Bellamy. Didn't you know?"

Jess looked at him. "No."

"Well, you needn't look at me like I stole your last dollar," Koller said gruffly. "A man has to work in order to eat, even an old feller like me."

Jess hesitated. "Didn't Bellamy ever mention his family?"

"Nope. And don't be asking me about what's none of my business."

Jess realized then that Kirk had probably been right about Bellamy's crew. They had probably thought little of the old man to begin with, and had changed their loyalties without any qualms. Jess went out and walked slowly around the yard, thinking it over.

KIRK came from the direction of town an hour later, wearing new clothes and driving a spanking new buggy behind a team of matched chestnuts. There were two men with him. One was a red-faced man in a stiff collar and a town suit. The other was pudgy, and wore a black suit that had a star pinned to the lapel.

Jess was sitting on the top corral rail as they drove up. He saw them all looking at him, as Kirk said something. The three men entered the house, and came out about a half hour later, laughing at something one of them had said. Kirk drove them back toward town. He returned about dark.

"Was that the sheriff?" Jess asked.

"That's right," Kirk said. "He came out from the county seat with the lawyer who handled Bellamy's affairs."

"How come the sheriff didn't question me about the shooting?"

"I took care of that," Kirk said. "Anyhow, that man doesn't give a damn one way or the other."

"What're they going to do about Bellamy's ranch and cattle?"

"Did you say 'ranch'?" Kirk asked mockingly. "Bellamy didn't have title to a foot of that grass. He's been squatting since he settled here."

"What about his cattle?"

Kirk grinned. "I bought 'em, kid. The lawyer knew where Bellamy's son lives, back East. He sent a telegram saying the old man had been killed, and suggested the fellow sell out. Young Bellamy went for it, and the lawyer and I made a deal."

"What kind of a deal?"

Kirk pressed his lips tight together. "That's my business, kid." He turned away, then looked back. "You might pack your gear. We're moving to Bellamy's place in the morning, lock, stock and barrel."

It was a long, low log house with galleries at front and back. The bunkhouse could sleep twenty men, and there were three large corrals and an enclosed pasture dotted with fat Herefords. There was a cooking shed and a stable, as well as a blacksmith shop and a large tool shed.

Kirk showed Jess around, saying, "What do you think, kid? Ever see a better layout?"

"No."

Kirk gave him a brief glance of annoyance. "Is that all you have to say?" he asked sarcastically.

Jess shrugged and kept silent.

"If a man were to hand you a hundred dollars," Kirk went on, "I reckon you'd throw it back at him. What's wrong with you, kid?

You have the world by the tail, and you don't seem to realize it."

"I was just thinking how many years it took Bellamy to build this up."

"What of it?" Kirk demanded.

"Nothing, I guess."

Kirk laughed. "Well, cheer up. Put your gear in that back bedroom and get settled. As my foreman, you rate a room all to yourself."

"Foreman?"

"That's what I said. I made Cash range boss, but you and I'll be working mostly together. You have a lot to learn, kid, and I'm the man to teach you. All right?"

Jess hesitated. "All right."

"We'll be branding all next week, but you'd better stick around here and get plenty of rest. You still look like you need it."

But Jess was restless, and felt he was well enough to fork a horse. So next morning, after breakfast, he saddled a gentle mare and rode in the direction of Oldun's ranch, secretly hoping for a glimpse of Natalie. He stopped on the wooded rise above the house and looked carefully around the sunny yard, an odd feeling in his stomach, and an ache where his heart should be.

THERE wasn't a soul around the place as he started down slope. Then, as he came up to the porch, Natalie came outside and studied him soberly.

"Hello."

"Hello."

There was an awkward silence, during which he took his hat off and fumbled with the brim, hoping she'd ask him to light down.

"You still look peaked," she said. "How do you feel?"

"All right." He cleared his throat. "Are your folks around?"

"Mom's visiting, and Pop's out on the range."

"Everything all right?"

She hesitated. "I suppose."

"What's wrong, Nat?"

She looked straight at him. "Don't you know?"

"Would I be asking?"

"All right, I'll tell you," she said, an edge of anger in her voice. "It's Kirk. I know you admire him, and that he's your boss, but I have to say this about him: he's no better than Bellamy was, and maybe even worse."

Jess frowned. "How do you mean that?"

"Pop and the others finally talked to him, and he said there wouldn't be any sharing of what he now claims is his grass."

"That's hard to believe."

"Is it?" She gave a short laugh. "Listen, let me tell you about your boss. He had something like this planned right along, only we were too stupid to see it. He had his brand registered even before he suggested taking cattle in lieu of wages, and he already had title to Larner's old place in his pocket.

"And then there's the business of his brand. I don't know if you ever gave it a thought, but he can cover the Circle-C with his Target and no one will ever know the difference. On top of that, the sheriff and Bellamy's lawyer were in town."

"They were at the other place before we moved."

"Did you talk to the sheriff? Did he ask you anything about the shooting?"

"No. Kirk said he took care of that."

"I can imagine," she said in a flat voice. "Well, Pop tried to talk to the sheriff about the graze, because he wanted it settled without trouble, and the sheriff brushed him off like he was no-account. But Kirk had the sheriff and that lawyer eating out of his hand."

"Kirk bought Bellamy's cattle through that lawyer."

"We know that. And we're also pretty sure Kirk paid him a nice bonus to settle the deal."

"What're you getting at?"

"You sure are dumb, Jess MacMurdy!" she said hotly. "How many head of cattle did he pay for? Maybe he paid for the Herefords, but we're willing to bet odds that the money he used he got from the sale of Bellamy's longhorns."

Jess shifted in the saddle and stared at the ground. All the doubts he'd had of Kirk rushed once again through his head. But he kept silent, feeling that his loyalty still belonged to Kirk.

"Well, that's about the size of it," Natalie

said crisply. "And don't think we're going to take it lying down. We have as much right to that free grass as Kirk has. Who does he think he is? First he claims to be on our side, and then he turns around and steps into Bellamy's boots. I think it's awful."

"I guess I'd better get going," Jess said.

"A good idea. You don't look well enough to ride."

He thought he saw the beginning of tears in her eyes, but before he could be sure she turned, with a rustle of skirts, and entered the house.

KIRK returned with the crew, one evening about a week later. Jess had worked around the corral after dinner and, feeling tired, had gone to lay down in his room. He fell asleep, and awoke hearing voices. When he went out to investigate, he found Kirk talking to the men on the front gallery.

"Have you been riding?" Kirk asked him.

"A little."

"That's good."

Kirk rolled a cigarette as Jess looked around. He recognized some of the faces, but was surprised to see Lew there. Lew grinned at him.

"How goes it, kid?"

"All right."

"That was some shooting," Lew said. "I'll bet old Trinidad's in hell right now, wondering how it happened." He guffawed. "At least he won't ever have to worry again about being cold."

"All right, all right," Kirk said, annoyed, "let's stick to business. Oldun and his bunch moved Dader's stock across the line yesterday." He glanced at Jess. "Did you know about it?"

"No."

"Well, I figure they knew we were in the hills, and they tried it to see what we'd do about it. And we'll do plenty."

"Why?" Jess said sharply.

Silence closed down on him, and he felt eyes staring, but he kept his own eyes steady on Kirk's face.

"What was that?" Kirk asked.

"We have more grass than we need. Why not let the others share it?"

Kirk said flatly, "We'll never have enough grass. And I told you once why I'm not letting anyone share it. If I let one man crowd me, they'll all be squatting on my doorstep. Is that enough reason to suit you?"

"No. Because that's the way Bellamy used to feel."

Kirk grinned briefly. "Maybe he was right, kid."

Eyes flashing, Jess said, "You hoped for this all along, didn't you? Right from the beginning. With Bellamy out of the way, you could take over." He took a deep breath. "I've been a fool, believing in you, having faith in you. I can see now that you even used me. You wanted me to fight Otis. You kept goading me, hoping I'd go in that saloon and kill him, because you knew that if I did kill him Bellamy would be forced to act." He stopped, his face flushed, his breath coming sharp.

"Anything else, kid?" Kirk asked softly.

"Yeah," Jess said angrily. "I think now that you saw your chance and killed Bellamy on purpose, not because he was going for his gun. It was what you were waiting for, wasn't it?"

He saw Kirk's eyes narrow to slits, saw the mouth tighten, and he knew then that he'd spoken the truth.

The tall man said in that same soft way, "I made a mistake, kid. I don't need you. You'd better pack and clear out."

Lew said quickly, "He'll warn 'em," and looked at Jess. "I'll stop him."

Jess stood there, feeling naked without his gun. He saw Kirk eyeing him in a speculative sort of way. "No, forget it," the tall man said finally. "I don't give a damn if he does tell 'em that at about this time tomorrow we're taking over Dader's place." He grinned flatly. "That's where Bellamy made a mistake, kid. Maybe he was getting old. But he sat back and waited for things to happen, instead of acting. If he'd been smart, he would never have let us push those longhorns into the valley."

"Let me take him," Lew said, standing up.

"I said forget it. I owe him something, and now I'm paying it back. You understand me, kid? If you didn't leave here alive, there would be no one to wonder what happened

to you. But I'm letting you go anyway. So the score is evened, kid."

Jess said nothing. He knew what Kirk meant. The tall man had never forgotten that Jess had saved his life.

Jess said, "It stuck in your craw all this time, didn't it?" Then he looked at Lew. "If you still want to take me after I get my gun, you're welcome to try." He waited a second, then went to his room for his gear.

IT WAS dark by the time he reached Oldun's place. Jess hailed the house. Oldun's figure appeared in the doorway at once, as if he had expected something like this. Lamplight shone on the rifle he held in his hands.

"If you're here as yourself, you're welcome. But if you're talking for Kirk, you'd best pull stakes."

"I'm through with him, Mr. Oldun."

"Then light down and come in. Supper's still on the table, and the coffee's hot."

"I left before supper, so I can eat a bite."

Natalie brushed past her father and waited for Jess, with a tremulous smile around her mouth. "You talked to Kirk?"

"I'll tell you all about it when we get inside."

Jess talked while he ate. "Kirk wasn't funning," he finished. "I guess he's pretty confident, and he means to take over Dader's place. I doubt if wanting that grass is his main reason, though. What he really wants is to make you people realize that he's top man, and to make it stick. He said as much when he told me what he thought had been wrong with Bellamy."

Casey was there, and Oldun turned to him. "Saddle up and warn the boys," he said grimly. "Tell 'em all to be here in the morning. If Kirk wants a fight, he'll get one."

Casey went out. Oldun said heavily, "It isn't what we want, but there's no help for it."

Mrs. Oldun spoke, her face creased with worry. "Isn't there, Dan? Men'll be killed. Is it worth it? Can't we think of something else?"

"Not and call ourselves men," Oldun said gruffly.

Jess strolled around the yard with Natalie that evening. He said, "I never did get to see that cave you were telling me about."

"There's time." She hesitated. "Jess, I'm proud of you for breaking with Kirk. It wasn't easy, was it?"

"I keep remembering what my stepfather told me before I left home," he said. "I guess I'm just beginning to understand what he meant about losing what makes living worthwhile, and how there's more to most men than meets the eye. I'd never before met anyone like Kirk, any man with the confidence he has. It's hard to believe now that at bottom he thinks only of himself. But I can recall things he said that should have warned me, long before this. I guess I'm pretty dumb."

"You're young, but you're learning. Folks aren't all that way, Jess."

"I reckon not."

"There's good in most people. Do you believe that?"

"Sure." He took her hand. "Let's go to the house."

He was restless that night, and found it hard to sleep. The thought of what Kirk had planned stung him again and again. Now that there would be a showdown, he slowly realized that the tall man had made no idle boast when he had told him his plans. Kirk had come this far, and he would not chance spoiling what he had.

Kirk was thinking wrong. Nor was it right that others should suffer because of him. When the men gathered next morning, Jess had made up his mind.

The men had brought their families, and the women and children would stay at Oldun's while the men were protecting Dader's herd.

Oldun said, "There'll be no shooting unless they start it, remember that. If that man has an ounce of sense left, he'll act reasonable."

The women listened with worried faces, but kept silent. The reek of trouble had been with them all during the time Bellamy lived. Now that Bellamy was dead, another, stronger man had taken his place, and trouble faced them in all its raw violence.

They ate an early noon meal, and then the men saddled their horses and rode out. Jess held back when he saw Natalie coming up.

She said, "You shouldn't go, Jess. You're not well enough."

"I'll make out."

"Please come back," she said.

HE FOLLOWED the others at a walk. But once out of sight of the house, he dipped below the rise of a hill and worked his way north, taking his time. Two hours later, he traversed a wooded slope and tied his horse below the rim. Then he moved forward at a crouch until he looked down on Kirk's holdings.

Three or four men lounged on the back gallery. Two cowboys came from the bunkhouse and joined them. Before long, Jess counted eleven men. Kirk came out and talked to them for a while, then went back into the house.

It was time. Jess worked his way down the slope, keeping the barn between him and the house, striding softly. He reached the protection of the barn and heard Koller busy with his pots and pans in the cook shed. He waited.

A door slammed. Looking past the edge of the barn, Jess saw Kirk on the gallery, rifle in hand. He said something, and men rose and headed for the corral.

As Kirk came down the steps last, Jess moved into view. He came forward slowly. "You're not leaving here alive, Kirk."

Kirk whirled, his eyes set and staring. The two men ahead of him stopped, saw who it was, and called softly to the others.

"You're doing wrong, and I won't stand for it," Jess said. "And since the score's even, let's get this settled."

"Why, you damn crazy kid! What chance do you think you have?"

"I'm not worried about that. It's you, Kirk, the way it was Bellamy before you. If I stop you, maybe the rest of these boys will get some sense."

"Sense is what *you* need."

"Don't talk so much. That was Bellamy's trouble, remember?"

Blood rushed to Kirk's face, throbbed in his temples. But he grinned. "Kid—" he began. Then he jerked the rifle up, one-handed, and fired.

Jess had seen it coming, and he moved and drew even as the barrel leveled on him. His bullet took Kirk in the body. The tall man swayed, still holding the rifle, still grinning.

"I'll be damned if you didn't mean it," he said.

He suddenly levered a shell into the chamber of his rifle. Jess said, "Don't try it!" But then he saw that Kirk was looking past him. Jess turned at the slam of the shot, throwing himself to one side.

At the corner of the barn, Lew dropped his gun and pitched forward to the ground.

When Jess looked back at Kirk, he saw that Kirk was down. He ran over, shouting, "Kirk!"

Kirk's face was gray. He looked up at Jess and tried to hold onto the grin. "I haven't been the best, but I never did like to see a man get shot in the back." He took a ragged breath. "You did mean it, didn't you? And you'd do it again?"

Jess felt suddenly older and wiser. He had learned what Kirk had never learned, what the tall man had lacked, and he was the better for it.

"I'd do it again if I had to," he said.

There was the sound of hoofs, but Jess didn't notice. He was watching Kirk's eyes grow dim.

"You won't have to," Kirk said. "Kid, don't think too badly of me." The light went out of the eyes, the jaw grew slack, the body limp.

Jess rose. Something wrenched sharply inside him, and his eyes felt moist, so that he had to blink before he could look around.

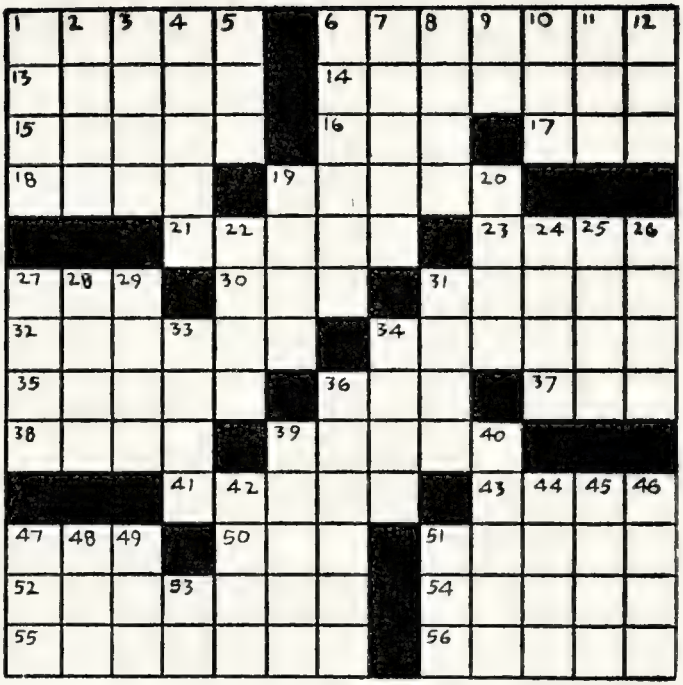
Oldun was there, and Kennedy and Dader and the others, and they were watching Kirk's crew. But there was no hint of violence in the air, nor would there be again in this valley, Jess thought.

Oldun rode over. "It's finished," he said. Then he added, out of deep worry, "You crazy fool! If Nat hadn't seen you ride off by yourself, if she hadn't followed you and warned us—"

"Forget it."

He saw her then, riding down the slope leading his horse. "Jess!" she called. "Jess!" And the promise of all their tomorrows was in her voice.

THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



The solution of this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

1 Western cattle farm
6 Hump-backed cattle
13 Conscious
14 Lassos
15 Less wild
16 Half of two
17 Fourth letter
18 Needle holes
19 Sweet substance
21 The ones there
23 Cry of pain
27 Mel —, baseballer
30 Malt beverage
31 Light boat
32 Cowboy
34 Horse's gait
35 Gallops easily
36 Male offspring
37 Unusual
38 Meat dish
39 Aspect
41 To begin
43 Catalogue
47 Fuss
50 To hasten
51 Wild West show
52 Cowboy
54 Unlocks
55 Building occupants
56 Whips

Solution to puzzle in preceding issue

DOWN

1 Charge per unit
2 Absent
3 Title
4 Top of a wave
5 Feminine pronoun
6 Lady's upper garment
7 Cattle land
8 Open surface
9 Hello!
10 Furious
11 Dined
12 South-southeast (abbr.)
19 Song for one
20 Parti-colored horse
22 Crones
24 Biblical preposition
25 Girl college student
26 Group of cattle
27 Night birds
28 Horse's gait
29 Binding strip
31 Food containers
33 Fresh information
34 Outer garment
36 Narrow pieces
39 Calico horse
40 To run away to wed
42 In comparison with
44 Notion
45 Dispatched
46 To fling
47 To behave
48 Female deer
49 To possess
51 To steal from
53 Laughter sound

Dangerous Decision

by TEDDY KELLER

CHUCK MOWBRY COULD easily get romantic about Ellen . . . but a man learning to be a cattle rustler has no time for girls

CHUCK MOWBRY sat on the top porch step and built a smoke. Watching the men dismount, he knew what was on their minds, and he knew the decision that faced him. Actually, the decision had been made. He had only to justify it to himself.

Burt Styles ducked under the tie rail. A short, wiry man, his black stubbled face was set in a baked-in frown. Close-spaced eyes mirrored a dark, malicious soul. Waiting for the other three men, he hunkered down at the foot of the steps and spat tobacco juice between his boots.

"Any luck?" Chuck asked.

Burt cursed. "From the looks of it," he said, "your cows have had no calves. We've been all over hell and gone. And if you think your law-abiding neighbors aren't helping themselves to your beef, you're plumb loco."

"What's the size of our herd?" Chuck asked, watching the three punchers sit and squat near Burt.

"We figure if you sold out every cow," Burt said, "you could just about pay our back wages."

Chuck's match flared along the leg of his Levis. Pulling smoke, he said, "Maybe that's what I'd better do."

"Like hell." Burt glanced toward the house and lowered his voice. "Your sister still here?"

Chuck shook his head. "They left three days ago. I'd've ridden out to find you boys, but the bank wanted to talk about money, and a cattle buyer hit town, and I couldn't get away. I was in the corral saddling up when I saw you boys riding in."

"You know what you said," Burt muttered. "You said if we found out folks were stealing from you, that we'd steal right back. Wages aren't enough, after waiting as long as we have. We have a bonus coming."

Chuck looked at each of the other men. Ed, Shorty, and Jud nodded in agreement. Chuck

shrugged. What was the use of arguing? Sure he could sell the cattle, but then what good would the ranch be? He'd never had such a run of luck. First there was the busted leg that had laid him up most of the winter and spring.

Then Nancy had showed up with little Tommy. She'd been ready to go to pieces because of big Tom's sudden death, and she needed a lot of attention. In the three weeks they were there, Chuck had hardly been out of the house.

"Well," he said finally, "even in the Bible it says to fight fire with fire."

"Sure," Burt said, "but you should have started a long time ago. I figure some of the calves that were stolen ought to be about market size by now. Hell, I'll bet the Double Deuce's been stealing your beef for years."

Chuck flipped away his cigarette and grinned. Picturing the situation, stealing from thieves, he felt mirth warming him. And he realized he hadn't done much laughing lately. Oh, he had laughed a lot for Nancy's benefit, but that hadn't come from deep inside. He chuckled then, feeling good, feeling a return of some of the old recklessness, the old happy-go-lucky attitude.

"Well," he said, "I guess we owe it to ourselves to get back what's ours. We can't hang any higher for rustling a hundred head than for stealing one calf."

The three punchers whooped. Burt's frown relaxed to as near a smile as it would ever get. And Chuck grinned. He wasn't certain what combination of events had decided him to turn rustler, but now that the decision was made, he regarded it with enthusiasm.

YEARS ago, Chuck's father had told him, "Whatever the job you have to do, it'll be twice the fun if you do it with a laugh." And Chuck had laughed through good years and bad, through Indian scares and range disputes, through the Civil War and storms and drought and a dropping cattle market. It was only in the past few months that this light-heartedness had deserted him. He was glad now to welcome it back.

"Reckon we'd better have some running irons," Chuck said.

"We already have e'm," Burt told him.

The sound of a rattling buckboard cut him off. He whirled around. Chuck stood and peered down the road.

"Who's that?" Burt rasped, pulling his gun.

"Put your gun away," Chuck said. "We haven't done anything yet."

Burt turned, holstering the .45. "Maybe we'd better pull out."

"What're you scared of?" Chuck asked.

"It doesn't look good," Burt said. He turned and stared at the approaching buckboard. "This time of year your crew ought to be out on roundup. It doesn't look good for us to be here."

"Maybe not," Chuck admitted.

"Hey," Burt yelled suddenly, "It's the kid."

Alarm tingled up Chuck's spine. He fixed his gaze on the buckboard. That mop of blond hair could belong only to Tommy. Chuck stepped off the porch. Burt swore violently. They all stood and watched the buckboard clatter off the road, up the drive and into the yard.

"Uncle Chuck," Tommy cried, jumping down.

He ran to Chuck, eyes brimming, and threw his arms around Chuck's middle. Pushing his face against Chuck's belt, he began sobbing heavily. Chuck picked him up and carried him back to the buckboard. A storekeeper from town sat in the wagon. He flapped the reins nervously.

"What happened?" Chuck asked.

The man cuffed his hat back and mopped at his brow. Then he stared at his hands, avoiding Chuck's gaze. Finally he said, "It was in Beaver Canyon, two days ago. The stagecoach busted a wheel. Everything but the horses fell five hundred feet to the river. It killed the driver and two passengers. The guard and the boy were the only ones who came out alive, and the guard's all busted up."

"Nancy?" Chuck breathed.

"That'd be your sister? They buried her yesterday over at Twin Forks."

Chuck swallowed hard and found his own vision misting. He held Tommy tighter. The boy's sobs welled from deep inside, racking the small body.

"That's a brave boy," the storekeeper said. "It's the first tear I've seen out of him."

"Thanks for your help," Chuck said.

The storekeeper nodded and smiled. "Take care of that button. He's a spunky one."

The buckboard wheeled and rattled up the drive. Ignoring the men, Chuck moved around the house, stopping at the corral. Tommy's sobs eased. The boy straightened in Chuck's arms and rubbed at his eyes. He sniffled. Chuck handed him a red bandana, and the boy blew hard.

"It'll be a while till supper," Chuck said. "How would you like a ride on the buckskin mare?"

The boy's face brightened. "Gee, Uncle Chuck," he said.

Chuck set him on top of the corral fence, climbed up beside him, and helped him down on the other side. Together they saddled the horse. Tommy swung up eagerly eyes shining. Chuck opened the gate, and Tommy rode out.

"Don't go far," Chuck shouted.

Tommy waved, then clucked to the horse. The buckskin shook her head and leaned into an easy lope. Chuck closed the gate. Leaning there, he watched boy and horse gallop toward the foothills.

YOU'RE gonna have to get rid of the kid," Burt said sullenly.

Chuck turned. Burt stood near him, looking after Tommy. Chuck shoved away

from the fence and headed for the house. He said, "I'm afraid this changes everything."

"It don't change anything," Burt said, moving after Chuck.

Chuck circled the rambling house and sat again on the front steps. He took out the makings. Burt and the others watched closely.

"No use stalling," Burt said, moving to stand directly before Chuck. "You have to get rid of that kid. It's too risky having him underfoot. He might see too much. He might talk."

"I'll take care of Nancy's boy," Chuck stated. Staring blankly ahead, he whipped a match along his pants.

Burt cursed bitterly. "Your sister had no business getting herself killed."

"That's enough," Chuck snapped. He pulled deeply at his smoke. "I said this changed everything."

"And I said it didn't," Burt insisted. "You owe us money."

"I'll sell what I have to."

"Maybe we want interest on what you owe us."

"I'll sell more."

"How are you gonna support that kid if you sell everything?"

Chuck inhaled smoke and said, "I don't know."

"There's no way out for any of us," Burt said, hunkering down, "except what we figured out."

"No," Chuck said.

Burt glanced back to the others, then faced Chuck. He said, "You gave us your word."

Chuck stiffened and stared at Burt. Then he flipped away his cigarette and paced the length of the porch. He tried to remember what he had said, but Tommy's arrival and the tragic news had blotted out recollections. Finally he stopped and regarded Burt for a long moment.

Then he said, "If I gave my word, I'll stand by it."

"Okay," Burt said derisively, "you stay here and play nurse maid. We'll handle the rest."

The four men mounted and rode around to the rear of the house. Chuck heard them moving about the storeroom. In a few minutes they pounded toward the hills. Chuck sat on the steps and smoked. Only now did he let himself think about Nancy.

Again the lump swelled into his throat. His eyes misted over and he buried his face in his hands. A thousand bitter-sweet memories flashed through his mind—Nancy's pigtails and rag dolls, their scraps, the way she handled a horse, her stiff backbone when their mother and father had died, her first beau, and her last.

"Uncle Chuck."

He stood and saw Tommy and the buckskin heading for the corral. The boy walked the horse, remembering his lessons. He rode well. Already his cheeks glowed. And Chuck found consolation in the fact that Nancy had not lived to see her brother turn outlaw.

Together Chuck and Tommy unsaddled the buckskin and rubbed her down. The boy bubbled with enthusiasm. Chuck, who couldn't have talked, didn't need to. Tommy praised the horse, and told where he had ridden and what he had seen.

"You like the buckskin, don't you?" Chuck asked as they walked to the house.

"Oh, yes," Tommy said. "She's beautiful."

Chuck hesitated only a moment, wondering where the idea had sprung from. He said, "You know that school is still going on?"

"Yes, sir."

"Tell you what. If you'll go to school and help your old uncle around the place, you can have the buckskin for your own."

"Uncle Chuck!"

Tommy hugged Chuck and squealed with delight. Then he broke away and ran to the corral. He stood there gazing in awe at the buckskin mare.

RIDING into the schoolyard next morning, Chuck tried to shake off the feeling of guilt. All night he had told himself that Tommy should be in school, that he should meet other children his own age. But now Chuck could think only that he was getting Tommy out from underfoot. Nancy's boy was in the way.

They swung down from their mounts at the tie rail. Chuck watched while Tommy loos-

ened his cinch. Then they turned toward the school house as a bright voice asked, "Which one of you is to be a student here?"

"Me," Tommy called.

Chuck blushed. The color deepened when he saw the girl standing on the school steps. She was small, and she stood with hands on hips, smiling. Brown hair fell in waves to the shoulders of her simple gingham dress. A spark danced deep within her dark eyes, and the smile widened her generous mouth.

"I'm Ellen Harkness," she said. "I don't believe I know either of you gentlemen."

Chuck halted at the foot of the steps and swept off his hat. "I'm Chuck Mowbry. This is my nephew. Tommy, say hello to Miss Harkness."

Tommy dipped his head in a slight bow and said, "I'm glad to meet you, Miss Harkness."

"On second thought," Chuck said, "maybe Tommy'd better run the ranch and I'll go to school. His manners are best."

Miss Harkness laughed as if she meant it and said, "Tommy, you run inside and meet the others." She paused until he had disappeared. Then she said, "Please tell me about him."

Twirling his hat nervously, Chuck began to tell about Tommy. He blurted the story awkwardly. Then abruptly, the teacher's interest calmed him, and he finished with ease.

"How terrible," she said. "It's a tragedy for a boy so young to have gone through so much. But I'm glad he had someone like you to care for him and love him."

The word "love" set Chuck to twirling his hat again. He realized with a start that he had never been in love. And he knew that it wouldn't take much to put him in that condition about this teacher.

"Miss Harkness," he said, "I—"

"Please." She smiled again, and glanced behind her. In a lowered voice, she said, "It's all right for the children, but don't you call me miss. It makes me feel old."

"Ellen," Chuck said. "I don't know much about Tommy's schooling, but I figure if anybody can take care of him, you can."

"Thank you, Chuck," she said. "I'm sure we'll get along fine."

She hurried into the school then, and Chuck mounted and rode out. The vision of her smile moved before him. He began picturing her on picnics in the hills, in a buggy beside him along the river. He was unsaddling in the corral before he remembered. He was a rustler now. Ellen Harkness was forever beyond him.

The thought jolted him. Things had happened so fast that he hadn't had time to reckon the consequences of his decision. Now he wondered how he had ever let himself be swayed, even for a moment. He knew of no outlaw in this part of the country who had ever escaped justice. The most vivid memory of his childhood was the sight of three cattle thieves hanging from the limb of a cottonwood.

Through a long morning, Chuck paced the porch, the long living room. Had he given Burt his word to turn rustler? He remembered saying something about fighting fire and about running irons. But when had he promised to steal?

The more Chuck thought about it, the more he was certain that he was in no way bound to be anything but honest. If Burt had misinterpreted something, then Burt must be straightened out. The sooner Chuck told him, the better.

He saddled, wondering where he would find the men. He could start with the high meadow. He hadn't ridden up there for so long he couldn't remember the last time.

When was it? There'd been the broken leg, and before that he had been busy around the corral all the time, keeping the horses fit for Burt and the men. It must have been almost two years since he had ridden up toward the high meadow. Burt had met him there. They had been about to ride on up when they heard gunfire. They had investigated and found nothing. And then it had been too late in the day to head for anywhere but home.

CHUCK swung into the saddle. Even if he didn't find the men it'd be good to ride his range again. He had just closed the corral gate when he heard a hard-pushed horse. He hipped around in the saddle. The

buckskin pounded toward the house. A horse and a wildly bouncing buggy followed close behind. Chuck dismounted.

The buckskin slid to a stop, and Tommy hit the ground running. Puffy eyed, tear streaked, he dashed to Chuck and threw his arms around him. He whimpered and choked and held on. Chuck tousled the boy's hair and watched Ellen climb from the buggy.

Taking Tommy in his arms, Chuck walked

"Why can't you be Davy Crockett like the other kids?"

to the tie rail. He said, "Looks like school's out early today."

"I dismissed at noon," Ellen said, eyes snapping. "We almost had a riot."

Another crisp gingham dress molded her slender, supple body. Chuck was torn between admiring her and finding what the trouble was. He led the way to the porch.

"Uncle Chuck," Tommy said, his voice small, "they said at school that you aren't an honest rancher. They said you hired gunslicks instead of cowboys."

Shock tightened Chuck's lean frame. Absently, he motioned Ellen to a chair, then put Tommy down and sat on the steps. A tremor ran through his fingers as he built a smoke.

"Is that what people think?" he asked.

"They're only children," Ellen said.

Chuck fired up his smoke. "Kids usually say what their folks say."

"Is it true?" Ellen asked.

Tommy stamped a foot and said fiercely, "No!"

Over his cigarette, Chuck caught Ellen's sharp glance. He dug a hand into Tommy's hair. "You rode in here awfully hard," he said to the boy. "Don't you think you'd better take care of your horse? Go for a ride. You have all afternoon."

"Sure," Tommy said, smiling. He moved quickly away, then halted and regarded his uncle soberly. "It's not true, is it?"

"Tommy," Chuck said, laughing, "do I look like a bank robber or a rustler or some other hardcase?"

"Nope," Tommy said. Then, grinning, he hurried to his horse.

Chuck watched boy and horse out of sight. Then he faced Ellen. Her expression gave him a start. She was all serious, and maybe even just a little mad, and some peeved, too.

"Chuck, I'm not accustomed to letting school out at noon," she said coldly. "I want to get to the bottom of this."

"What happened?" Chuck asked.

"I introduced Tommy to the other children," she said, "and told them he was your nephew. You never heard such whispering. It went on all morning. Then, at noon, the minute Tommy stepped outside, the others began tormenting him. They said what Tommy told you—and a great many worse things."

Chuck shrugged. "Where do they get such ideas?"

"As you said—from their parents." Ellen paused. Then she continued, "Tommy started fighting them, but they ganged up on him. I couldn't stop them. All I could do was get him to his horse and then follow him home."

"He's a fighter," Chuck said, grinning.

"He has enough spunk and raw courage for ten boys," Ellen said. "And he's smart, too. It didn't take long to see that. He has a good head, and he's mature beyond his years."

"He had to grow up fast," Chuck said, thoughtfully.

Ellen sat rod stiff in her chair. "He's been through a lot. He's not going through more."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean Tommy's had his share of tragedy," Ellen said heatedly. She jabbed a finger at Chuck. "No uncle or anybody is going to cause that boy more heartache. If what those children said about you is even close to the truth, I'll steal Tommy away from you. He deserves better than being brought up with a gang of toughs."

Chuck ground his cigarette under his boot heel and gazed at Ellen for a long moment. Determination locked her jaw in a firm line, and spunk and courage flamed deep in her eyes. She would do what she said. Suddenly Chuck knew what he had to do.

Standing, he said, "Tommy will stay here. After today he and I will be alone on the place."

"Then you do have outlaws working for you."

"No, I don't think so, ma'am," Chuck said. "They may be mean, but they're good hands."

BRIEFLY he told her about Burt and the others, about his broken leg, about Nancy, about his diminishing herd. Only as he talked did he begin to realize to what extent Burt had run things for almost two years. When he had finished, he sat and rolled another smoke. Ellen left her chair and strolled the porch.

"Your father must have been an honorable man," she said.

Chuck nodded.

"And most of the people you know are honest, aren't they?"

"Yes'm."

Ellen faced him and smiled sympathetically. "Chuck, you're a trusting fool. Because of a broken leg, and things to do here, and business in town, you haven't seen most of your range for a long time."

"Just the low meadow," Chuck admitted. "That's where what stock we have left is rounded up—maybe a hundred and fifty head."

"And you're perfectly willing to take Burt's word for it that your neighbors have been stealing from you."

She walked to the end of the porch and stood gazing back to the hills. When she turned, Chuck said, "There's no reason for him to lie. If I have no cattle, nobody gets paid."

"What if he had lied?" Ellen asked, turning. She sat on the porch railing and said, "Suppose he's been lying to you all this time. Suppose he's crooked. What then?"

"But he isn't," Chuck insisted. "A cowpoke doesn't cheat the man he works for."

"But suppose," Ellen repeated. "What then?"

Chuck pulled thoughtfully at his cigarette, then stomped it out. Something knotted in his stomach. He glanced sharply at Ellen.

"Why," he said, "if Burt were a no-good sidewinder, he could've been stealing from our neighbors all this time. And he'd've tried to talk me into this rustling deal just to get his money—because he couldn't sell the beef anywhere close without folks getting suspicious. But, as a ranch owner, I could sell it."

"And maybe then he'd kill you," Ellen said, "to get all the money." She paused, then asked, "Could that account for the fact that your cows haven't calved?"

"Sure," Chuck said. Anger pushed him to his feet. "The high meadow—that must be where he's been keeping the cattle he stole."

Ellen turned to lean on the railing and peer toward the hills. "I didn't think any four men could rustle that much beef overnight."

Chuck ran to her. Cattle streamed from the timber and out across the low meadow, and he could make out even more in the trees stretching far up the high meadow trail.

"If I were you," Ellen said, "I'd ride for town and get the sheriff."

"I can't leave you here. You go to town," Chuck said.

"Neither one of you is going anywhere."

Chuck wheeled. Burt stood in the living-room doorway, his gun in his hand. Smirking, he stepped onto the porch. Jud followed him, carrying Tommy. The boy was securely bound and gagged.

"Too bad you had to go and figure everything out," Burt said, moving warily to the end of the porch. He snatched Chuck's gun. Backing to the edge of the porch, he leaned his shoulder against a post and laughed derisively. "Now I'm gonna have to watch you."

"You can't keep Elleen here," Chuck said.

"Don't worry about me," she said. She

took a step forward. "Tommy, are you all right?"

The boy nodded vigorously, and kicked back at Jud. The man rapped knuckles on Tommy's head. Chuck strained forward.

"Hold it," Burt snapped. "You sit down and relax. None of you is going anywhere till tomorrow. Then Chuck and I are gonna ride to town and get a cattle buyer to come out here. After I get the money, then I'll figure what comes next."

"You'll kill us," Ellen said.

"I'll kill you and the kid if Chuck tries anything."

Ellen held herself erect. "You'll kill us anyway as soon as you get the money. Why don't you do it now and get it over with?"

"Aw, now," Burt said, then broke off. A cold light glinted in his eyes. He glanced to his companion and laughed.

"Maybe that's a good idea," he said. "It might look suspicious if all three of you died together. Cover 'em, Jud."

Jud set Tommy down and pushed him away, then whipped out his gun.

CHUCK pulled the boy close and untied him. Then he turned to the tie rail. Burt was on the off side of the buggy. He tinkered for several minutes, then came back to the porch.

"Git in, ma'am," Burt said. "You're going for a little ride."

"No," Chuck said. "Burt, you can't do that."

"Shut up!" Burt shouted. He pulled out his gun and snapped a shot into the floor at Tommy's feet. He rasped, "Schoolmarm, if you aren't in that buggy in ten seconds, I'll shoot the boy."

Chuck sagged helplessly against the railing. Futilely, he remembered his father's loaded guns—the Sharps .50 and the cap-and-ball Colt—which still hung over the mantle. But he could only watch Ellen.

She kissed Tommy's forehead, smiled bravely to Chuck, and went down the steps. Burt moved beside her. He made a grand bow and handed her up. As she seated herself, he sprang up, swinging his gun. It sliced down across her head. She slumped in the seat. Burt whacked the horse's rump, yelled, and fired his gun into the air. The horse reared and bolted.

Chuck gripped the porch post in blind fury. He saw both Burt and Jud slapping their legs, roaring with laughter, watching the flight of the buggy.

He muttered, "C'mon, Tommy," vaulted the railing, and raced to the corral.

Chuck had the gate open before he looked back. Tommy was trying to get up from the ground, but Burt sprawled on him from behind. Tommy must have fallen while jumping from the porch.

"Go on!" Tommy screamed.

"Stop or I'll kill the kid!" Burt yelled.

The gamble flashed through Chuck's mind, and instantly he weighed the odds. If he got through, Tommy would be Burt's only hostage. If he didn't make it, both Tommy and Ellen were doomed anyway.

Leaping to the back of a roan stallion, Chuck yelled and dug heels into the horse's flanks. The roan lunged for the gate. Knee-reining. Chuck guided a wide circle past the porch. Guns exploded. A bullet snipped a bit off the roan's mane. Another slug tugged at Chuck's billowing shirt.

Then he was clear. The horse pounded up the drive and onto the road. Chuck bent low, urging the roan on. The big animal lengthened his stride. Ahead, the buggy bounced crazily along the rutted road.

Now the road swung along a creek. Wet rocks glistened under the bright slanting sun. Chuck could see a buggy wheel begin to wobble. He yelled to the roan, slapped its rump, and prayed.

Slowly the gap closed. But now the buggy was lurching with the violent wobbling of the wheel. At any moment the wheel might fly off, pitching Ellen onto the rocks of the creek.

Chuck cried out to the horse. The roan lunged, and its head came abreast of the rear buggy wheels. Then the horse was even with the buggy, and Chuck saw Ellen's limp body jerking from side to side. Once more he shouted to the roan. The big horse surged forward. Chuck kneed him in close, and jumped.

He got a leg over the buggy horse. For an instant he fought for balance, groping fran-

tically for the reins, missing, then catching them. Bracing, he hauled back hard. The horse slid and then stopped. At the last turn, the buggy wheel dropped off.

Whistling for the roan, Chuck jumped down and darted to the buggy. Ellen stirred. Her eyes fluttered open and fright flooded them.

"You're all right," Chuck said. He helped her to a sitting position in the crippled buggy. Then he said, "I hate to leave you, but I have to get Tommy out of there."

He turned, sprang onto the roan, and smiled down at Ellen. She was holding her head groggily, but she managed to muster a smile. Her lips formed the words, "Thanks." Chuck spoke to the roan, and the horse leaped into an easy gallop.

Halfway back to the ranch, Chuck veered off the road and into timber. He dismounted. Then, pointing the roan toward home, he slapped its rump. The horse swung around the timber at a lope. In a few minutes he'd be at the corral. Again Chuck was gambling. Burt might figure the horse had gotten away from Chuck. But he also might think Chuck had been thrown, might even guess that Chuck and Ellen had died together. If so, it would make him relax his guard.

MOVING through the timber, Chuck halted at the opposite edge. Only now did he realize how wide a hundred yards of open ground could be. He had a clear view of the house, but those in the house could spot him as easily. He would have to wait till it was dark.

The sun dipped behind the hills to the west. Bits of clouds absorbed the fleeting rays of sun and turned from white to pink, then red and orange. Slowly the cloak of night pushed across the sky from the east, gently snuffing light from the clouds.

Chuck lay on his belly and watched. Shorty and Ed rode wearily to the house. Jud sat on the porch steps with a Winchester across his lap. Burt checked with Jud repeatedly. And always Burt had a handful of Tommy's hair and was dragging the boy after him. Chuck fought down the desire for a smoke.

Abruptly, full darkness lay over the land. Lamps came on in the house. Voices drifted from the porch, and Chuck knew the guard had been changed. He gathered himself in a crouch and slipped silently from the timber.

Already the eastern sky glowed with the promise of a full moon. Chuck would have little time. He quickened his pace, but paused from time to time, ears straining, heart pounding. At one stop, as he crouched in the grass, his hand closed over a rock. He picked it up and carried it along.

The darkness had become a thick, almost tangible curtain. He pushed on through it. Then the black hulk of the house loomed against the skyline. He dropped to hands and knees. A lamp flared in the house, splashing light almost at Chuck's fingertips. He backed and circled it.

Suddenly his boot scraped over a patch of rock. The guard stirred. He stood and towered almost over Chuck's head. Chuck held his breath. The guard took a step. Chuck leaped, swinging the rock in his hand. The guard groaned and slumped forward. Chuck had snatched rifle and sixgun almost before the man hit the ground.

"Shorty?" Burt called from inside.

Chuck peered wildly into the dark. He took a step toward the house, then froze. Another figure loomed out of the darkness.

"Hey, Burt!" It was Jud's voice. "It's Chuck!"

Jud's gun stabbed fire, and a bullet seared across Chuck's ribs. Boots pounded inside the house. Chuck snapped a shot and jumped aside. Jud's gun answered.

Again Chuck weighed his chances. Jud blocked his escape around the house, and his chance of dropping Jud, in the dark, was small. In a moment three men would face him. He wheeled and raced toward the drive.

Running, he held the .45 behind and fired. Then he swerved sharply, trusting to instinct. He dived headlong, and rolled behind a low bush just as Burt and Ed burst from the house.

"He was headed for the road," Jud shouted. Pointing, he said, "He took a shot at me from right there."

"He's all through," Burt said, wheeling to the door.

In a moment he reappeared, dragging Tommy by his hair. He crossed to the steps and

shouted, "All right, Chuck, we know you're out there. You have ten seconds to give yourself up, or I start hurting this kid."

"Don't do it," Tommy cried. "Don't surrender."

"Shut up," Burt grated, and slapped the boy. Then he shouted, "You heard me, Chuck. Ten seconds."

Chuck rolled to his side. Facing the drive, he cupped his hands to his mouth and called, "I'm coming. Don't hurt the boy."

The men still peered to the drive. They'd expect Chuck to come from there. He crouched again.

Putting down the Winchester, he loaded the sixgun full. He stepped out quickly. He was within almost spitting distance before they spotted him.

SNAPPING a shot, he lurched into a run. Burt heaved around, cursing. In that moment, Tommy broke from him and ran toward the door.

Ed and Jud threw lead at Chuck. Burt whipped around, bringing his gun to bear on Tommy. Chuck jerked a shot, then another. Burt's hat darted from his head. He turned from Tommy.

Guns blasted. A bullet grazed Chuck's neck, another ricocheted off his cartridge belt. On a dead run, he fired three times before the gun clicked empty. Jud staggered back, folded in the middle and went down. Ed threw down his gun and raced to the end of the porch. He jumped, and his heel caught the railing.

Then Chuck was across the yard, taking the steps at a bound. A bullet gouged a fiery gash across his belly. Then he bent, scooped up Tommy and, hunching, crashed through the screen door. Tossing the boy aside, he reached above the mantle as he raced past. His hand closed on the rifle. Wrenching it free, he sprawled headlong. He got himself turned around just as Burt sprang trhough the door.

The rifle cracked, kicking, spewing fire and death. The heavy slug took Burt in the chest and flung him back through the door. His body thudded onto the porch.

Only then did Chuck hear hoofs pounding into the yard. He sprang for the mantle again.

His hand had closed on the cap-and-ball Colt when Ellen came through the door. The sheriff was right behind her.

Chuck sagged against the mantle. Ellen and Tommy reached him at about the same time, and he wasn't sure which one hugged him with more enthusiasm.

"Looks like we're too late," the sheriff said.

From outside a voice called, "There's two of 'em out here knocked plumb cold. And two more that won't even get a trial."

A little cry came from Ellen's throat, and her arms tightened around Chuck's neck. Dimly, he heard the sheriff say, "That schoolmarm sure doesn't act like she'd just ridden bareback to town and back. She doesn't even act like a schoolmarm."

And, far off somewhere, Tommy was saying, "What's all the kissing for?"

RANCH FLICKER TALK

Coming up in the next issue

A Roundup of Movie News and Views by

BOB CUMMINGS

Featuring a Review of 20th Century-Fox's

THE TALL MEN

Starring

CLARK GABLE and JANE RUSSELL

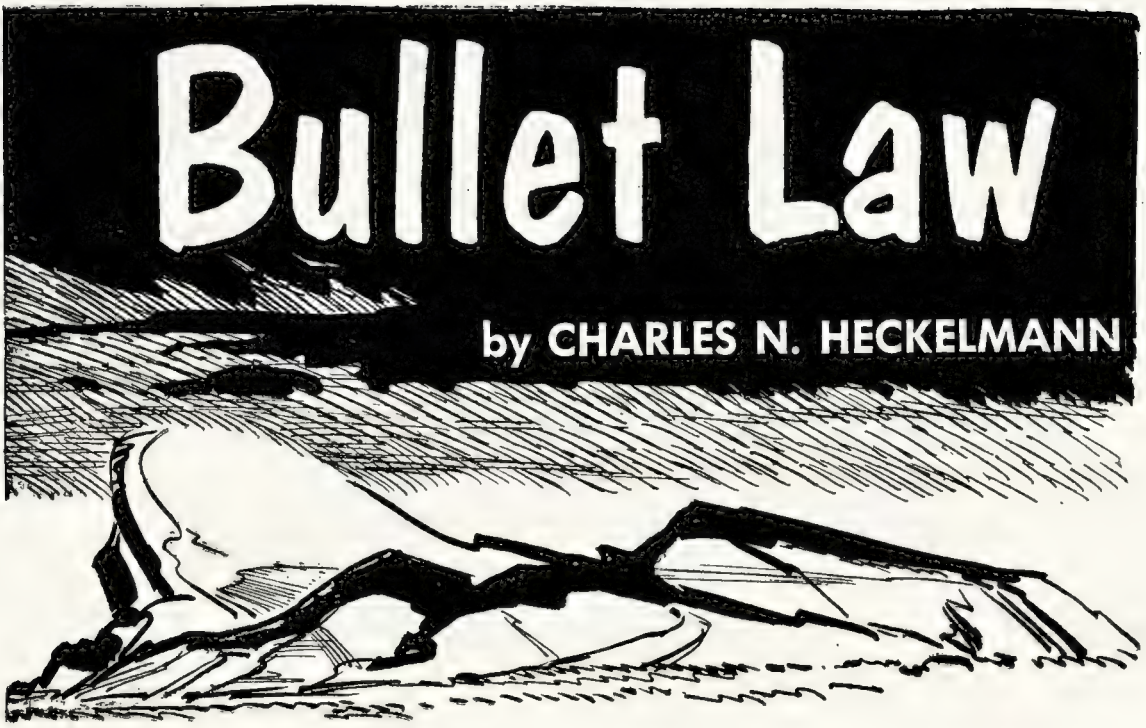
plus

A word and picture personality sketch of

JEANNE CRAIN

Bullet Law

by CHARLES N. HECKELMANN



TOM BRACKEN'S RETURN spelled danger to the ranchers . . . and even the girl he loved welcomed him home with a gun in her hand

PART ONE

DURING the early hours of the afternoon the contours of the land had gradually changed. The gray, treeless alkali flats, seared and steaming under the merciless sun, lay miles behind him. Around him now stretched rolling, broken country, the valleys lush and green after the recent spring rains, the hills green, too, and guarded by thick stands of pine and cedar and aspen.

He was in the lower reaches of the Tumurals, familiar country to him. A mile to the north cattle grazed in a grassy swale bisected by the narrow silver ribbon of a mountain creek. They must be pothook beef, he guessed. With rich pastures like the one he was looking at now, Dale Parrish would continue to be the envy of her neighbors.

His dark blue eyes, red-veined with weariness, followed the crystal glitter of the stream until he lost it in a high, wooded copse where the Tumurals began their steep climb toward the ramparts of the Divide.

The sight of that brawling creek brought back memories of cold morning plunges in its racing shallows, of shuffling lines of cattle coming down to water there during roundup time. For Lariat Creek, in its wild journey down from the upper Tumurals, cut through all the major ranches in Loreno, bringing life and richness to a country that saw little rain during most of the year.

East of the creek, the land lay banked in a series of rolling ridges and meadows. Farther east, in a small valley, a cluster of frame buildings marked the town of Loreno.

Almost reluctantly he pulled his glance away. If he wanted to reach Hammer by sundown, it was time to move on.

His big bay gelding answered the touch of the reins and was moving along the bench, when another rider broke from the trees to the right of the trail. Tom Bracken's hand slid instinctively toward the plain, walnut-butted Colt snugged against his right thigh. When he saw who the rider was, he dropped his hand.

"Dale, this is a pleasant surprise," he said. The sight of this girl never failed to spark an immediate emotional response in him. He noted with a warm feeling of remembrance the rich, red-gold glory of her hair.

"I heard you were coming back," she said.

"News travels fast."

"It's a good thing." Animosity swam in the gray eyes that regarded Bracken.

"Maybe you can explain that, Dale," he said.

"You can call me a reception committee of one," she told him.

"Thanks. It's nice of you." Bracken's words were bland, but his eyes were tight and cool and searching.

"Don't thank me."

The friendliness they had always shared was gone. In its place there seemed to be a taut hostility which completely shut him out.

"Why not?" Bracken asked, lightly smiling. "There are a lot of good times behind us."

"That's where they belong—behind us," Dale snapped.

HER sharp glance absorbed the bigness, the solid substance, of him. But she had come here for a purpose, and so she forced her attention away from the vibrant pull of his maleness.

Bracken sensed the antagonism struggling against the warm tug of memories. He asked gently, "Is there something on your mind?"

"Ride back the way you came," she said tonelessly.

"That's a fine way to greet a man after he's been away for more than a year." He watched her closely, his brows knitting in a frown.

"Things have changed."

"I reckon they have." The blunt angle of Bracken's jaw tightened.

"We don't want you in Loreno."

"Who's 'we'?"

"Pothook."

The frown between Bracken's dark blue eyes deepened, but he kept his voice level and steady. "Would you mind telling me why?"

"Hammer is too friendly with Brad Mantle."

Bracken lifted a restraining hand. "You're getting ahead of me. Tell me more—especially about this man, Mantle."

Dale shook her head. Bracken found himself staring at a short-barreled .38 revolver she held in her hand. "No more talking, Tom. Turn around and ride out."

Anger stirred in Bracken. He leaned both hands on the pommel of his saddle and regarded Pothook's young owner. "You really mean what you're saying, don't you?"

Dale nodded, the .38 unwavering in her fist.

"All right," he said. "That's plain enough. You want me to go." He smiled grimly. "I reckon, though, you know me well enough to guess that I won't listen."

At a slight flick of the reins his bay started forward. Dale's gray eyes darkened and she backed away. "Turn around!" she ordered in swift frenzy.

"Not me, Dale," he said, as the bay pushed on.

He was putting pressure on Dale and he wasn't sure which way she would break. He knew her for a firebrand. She had a will of her own and pride to go with it. The blood

was draining from her cheeks, and the hand holding the .38 was growing whiter and whiter.

He was a few paces from her when her eyes turned bleak. He drove the gelding straight at her. The .38 erupted into flame. Bracken saw that she had fired high deliberately, but he was taking no chances of a second shot. As the bay crashed into Dale's mare, he got a grip on her gun wrist and twisted hard. She cried out in pain, but he did not let go.

They struggled silently for a few seconds. Then the mare panicked and reared high, unseating Dale. She skidded backward over the cantle and Bracken, freeing his feet from the stirrups, went with her.

They landed in a flailing heap on the ground. Bracken jammed his thumb against the hammer of Dale's revolver. She relinquished the weapon. He flung it into the brush and rose to his feet.

He was bending down to help her up when a harsh crackle of brush behind him swung him around. Buck Wykel, the Pothook foreman, pounded into view. There was a long-barreled .45 in his meaty hand and his heavy, florid features were dark with rage.

He said, "Say the word, Dale, and I'll teach this bucko some manners."

"It's all right, Buck," Dale said. "I tried to order him off Pothook range, but he didn't take to the idea."

"You put your hands on Dale again and I'll kill you, Bracken." Wykel was a direct man, extremely loyal, with no tolerance or humor.

"Take it easy, Buck," said Bracken, trying to keep his own temper under control. "Dale pulled a gun on me. She ought to know me better than that."

"I have a gun on you, too. Why don't you try roughing me up?" The Pothook ramrod's brows drew together above his hawk-like nose, and his eyes were ugly.

"Maybe I will, friend."

"Don't do it, Tom," Dale broke in.

THAT stopped Bracken. Ordinarily even-tempered, he was enough of a rawhider to resent being pushed around. And there'd been enough violence in his recent past to condition him to it. For more than eighteen months he'd drifted through Montana, Idaho and Wyoming on various jobs.

He'd been a horse wrangler on a ranch near Billings, then tried a trouble-shooting post with a Nevada railroad. When the road went bankrupt he drifted on to Idaho, picking up a job as town marshal in frontier Boise. A disagreement with the town's influential ranchers had sent him on to cattle punching jobs with two Wyoming outfits.

In those various jobs he had gained more than a nodding acquaintance with brute force. He'd been involved in his share of saloon brawls, had outgunned three trigger-happy hardcases. Though he never deliberately sought a fight, he would meet trouble head-on when it presented itself. Wykel's challenge, therefore, was not an easy thing to ignore.

Glancing at Dale, he was startled by the naked fear shining in her eyes. She looked away then, coloring under his sharp scrutiny.

"Damn it, Dale," growled Wykel, "do you want him out of here, or not?"

"I want no shooting," she said.

"That thirty-eight you fired at me is no popgun," Bracken said.

Dale flushed but did not reply.

Bracken faced the Pothook foreman again. "Suppose you tell me what this is about? Dale said something to the effect that Hammer is too friendly with Brad Mantle."

"You know damned well what Dale meant," Wykel retorted. "Unbuckle your gun-belt and let it drop."

Bracken felt rage tug at him, but the big Colt in Wykel's hand warned that resistance was futile. He freed the worn leather belt that girded his waist, let it slide to the ground, and waited. Dale removed his rifle from its saddle scabbard and carried the weapon over to Wykel.

"All right," snapped the Pothook foreman. "Now get on your horse."

Bracken walked to the bay gelding and climbed aboard.

"Ride. Don't come back," cried Wykel.

Bracken's lips widened in a bleak, twisted grin. He tipped his hat to Dale, then kicked his horse into a canter.

Dale remounted and turned her mare north. Wykel jogged along beside her. He gave an angry tug at his flat-crowned hat.

"We made a mistake. I might have prodded him into a fight."

"Maybe Tom doesn't know about Ed and Mantle," Dale murmured.

Wykel snorted. "He and Ed are brothers, and joint owners of Hammer. Tom may have been fiddlefooting around the country the last couple of years, but you can bet your last Pothook cow that he knows everything that's been going on here. In fact, I'm betting Ed sent for Tom to lend a hand in the game Hammer and Mantle are playing."

"No one's ever been able to prove that Hammer is hooked up with Mantle," Dale pointed out.

"Maybe there's not enough proof to satisfy a court, but there's enough to satisfy me."

At the top of a hill the road abruptly forked. One branch swung toward Pothook and Hammer, the other angled northeast to Loreno.

Dale pulled up at the fork. "You go on to the ranch, Buck," she ordered. "I'm going to town to see if I can catch Slate Cooney. He took the buckboard in for supplies, and I forgot to tell him to get some flour and canned fruit."

"All right," said Wykel, "but I don't like you traipsing around the country alone. There's a range war coming, Dale."

She looked at the ramrod. Wise in the ways of the cattle country and in the ways of men, he was reading the signs of a land stirring to violence, and he did not like what he saw.

Wykel turned away and sent his horse galloping toward Pothook headquarters. Dale let the mare run free along the fork to town. A half-hour's steady traveling brought Dale into Loreno, where the road widened into a broad, rutted main street walled in by frame and clapboard business establishments. She passed a huge livery barn, a wagon repair shop, the Ten-Up Saloon, a blacksmith shop, two more saloons, and a barber shop.

FINALLY the wide loading platform of Jansen's Mercantile loomed up. There were three ranch buckboards drawn up by the platform. Among them she recognized the Pothook wagon.

As she dismounted, Slate Cooney tramped out of the store, burdened with a big carton of foodstuffs. He grinned at Dale and deposited his load in the wagon bed. The puncher was a gray-bearded man with thinning hair and nondescript features.

"Was there something else you wanted?" he asked.

"Yes," said Dale. "You'd better get fifty pounds of flour, and a case of tinned peaches."

Cooney turned back inside. Dale started toward the seamstress's shop, a small frame structure looking oddly dwarfed beside the two-story hotel. She was putting a hand out to touch the door handle when the door swung open and Sherry Oliver emerged.

Both girls looked startled. Dale frowned, and Sherry bit her lips in vexation. "How are you, Sherry?" Dale asked quietly.

"Fine," said the other girl. "Don't tell me you bring your business to Belle Graves, too."

Sherry Oliver was medium tall, slender and willowy, with a sensitive heart-shaped face that mirrored the mercurial changes of her temper. Her body was firm and well-fleshed, the breasts small and high, the waist pinched in, the thigh sleek and full beneath her gay, flowered dress. She had bright, vivid coloring, but her lips were small and not as generous as they might have been.

Dale bridled at the veiled sarcasm in Sherry's tone. Accustomed to working side by side with the Pothook crew, she seldom found an opportunity to wear dresses. Now, observing Sherry's sweet and arch femininity, she could appreciate the deep attraction the girl had for men.

It was inevitable that both girls should have been won by Tom Bracken's devil-may-care ways. Dale recalled how Bracken had divided his time between them until his brother Ed had begun to make a bid for Sherry. Though Dale's own feelings toward Tom had gradually turned cool because of his stubborn refusal to settle down and take life seriously, seeing Sherry now revived, as always, the deep rivalry between the two girls.

"Do you have any objection?" Dale queried acidly. "Or are you keeping Belle so busy she can't take any more dress orders?"

Sherry smiled. "My, you're sensitive today. Or is it that you're just having trouble keeping up with the Pothook crew?"

Dale flushed. Though Sherry had been

brought up on a cattle ranch too, she had no liking for the dreary and dusty work of roping, line riding, branding and fence repairing. And she never passed up a chance to deride Dale for participating in this tedious round of ranch chores.

"The trouble," said Dale, "was with a friend of yours, Tom Bracken." Sherry's eyes faltered away, and Dale said, "I see his name can still stir you."

"That's past and forgotten," Sherry said.

"I'm not sure. I can remember a time when you were ready to jump every time he showed up in the Crescent ranch yard."

Sherry ignored that and asked, "Where did you see him? And what brings him back?"

A mocking expression twisted Dale's features when she answered, "We met up in the hills near Winchester Pass. As to why he came back, you should be able to answer that."

"I'm afraid I can't."

"Hammer and Brad Mantle are probably getting ready to step up their activities, so they pulled Tom in. Wykel and I stopped Tom up at the Pass, and told him to go back to his fiddlefooting, on some other range. I figure one Bracken in Loreno is enough."

A swift, violent light flared in Sherry's hazel eyes. Her slender hands knotted. "Seems to me the Pothook is taking a lot for granted. Ed Bracken is losing Hammer stock just like the rest of us. As for Tom, he's been away more than a year and a half. How could he be rustling?"

"Your eager defense of Tom is touching," said Dale, with mixed anger and jealousy. "Better not let Ed hear you. He might not like it."

Sherry said, "Why should he object? Tom and I have never stopped being friends. But my feelings for him have nothing to do with my feelings for Ed." Then she gathered up her long skirts, swung around Dale, and moved quickly along the board walk.

Dale wondered how many people had witnessed her encounter with Sherry. Gone now was all desire to visit Belle Graves to be fitted for a dress. Dale went back to her horse, debating the advisability of remaining in town for dinner. After a moment she vetoed the idea. The only decent eating place was the hotel dining room, and she would surely meet Sherry there.

Annoyed and altogether out of sorts, Dale rode back to the Mercantile. She found Cooney waiting. She instructed the puncher to tie her saddle mare to the back of the buckboard, then settled herself beside him for the trip back to Pothook.

THE keen anticipation with which Tom Bracken had spent most of the day in the saddle had been replaced by irritation and a sense of outrage. Each passing mile during the afternoon's ride had shown him familiar landmarks that had filled him with a sense of homecoming. That feeling, however, had been dissipated by his reception from Dale and Wykel.

Now, as he cantered through the lower end of Winchester Pass, intent on making a wide swing into Loreno, he thought of that encounter. That Dale had been sincere, he did not doubt. What did concern him was her virtual admission that Pothook and Hammer were tilting against each other. The two ranches had always gotten along. Old Pete Bracken and Ben Parrish—both dead for several years now—had been among the first cowmen to settle in the area. Both spreads had grown and prospered.

Something must have gone wrong at Hammer. The thought gave more serious import to Ed's failure to answer Tom's last few letters. Dale had not been specific, yet she had clearly implied that Hammer was involved in operations detrimental to Pothook and to other outfits in the valley.

The name "Brad Mantle" meant nothing to him. If Ed had some working arrangement with Mantle, he had not mentioned it in his letters. But one thing was certain. If Hammer was in trouble, he intended to do something about it. Pothook could not scare him off.

His original plan had been to go right to Hammer. Now it appeared more logical to go to town to see what was in the wind. He kept the bay at a fast canter and, near sundown, entered town and rode straight to the McClellan Hotel.

He descended slowly from the saddle, letting his sharp glance probe up and down the

street. A half-dozen horses were racked up in front of the hotel. Among them he noted two Crescent brands, and guessed that Ned Oliver and Sherry were in town. No man could easily forget Sherry, he thought. She was proud and wilful and unpredictable, but warm-blooded.

As he mounted the steps to the hotel veranda, he noticed the two men posted at opposite ends.

Both were sprawled in chairs, with their booted feet propped up on the railing.

The man to his right was George Bond, the Crescent foreman, a sharp-featured, bullet-headed individual with close-cropped hair and piercing eyes. The other man, a stranger to Bracken, was a tall, lanky fellow with a shaggy, unkempt look. His veiled gray-green eyes followed Bracken with pointed attention.

Bracken tipped his head toward Bond and said:

"Hello, George."

The Crescent foreman just stared at him truculently, and spat over the railing. To Bracken it was like a slap. He felt a wild impulse to plant his knuckles in the Crescent ramrod's face.

But he controlled it and moved on into the lobby.

As he disappeared inside, the lanky stranger rose and sauntered down the walk to the Ten-Up Saloon, where he pushed through the batwing doors.

After the bright sunshine, Bracken found the musty hotel lobby disconcertingly dark and gloomy. At the desk Josh Willow, the pallid, watery-eyed clerk, spun the register around.

"You picked a bad time to come back home," he said.

Bracken scrawled his name in the book. "How come?"

"It's not for me to say," Willow grumbled. He turned to a row of pigeonholes behind him, and took out a key. "Take Number Twelve."

Bracken asked, "What's eating this town, Josh? If anyone's in a position to know, you are."

"The McClellan does business with all sides. Your dollar buys a room and a bed—and that's all."

IN THE small, heat-saturated room, Tom washed up quickly. Then he went downstairs again. Outside, he turned in the direction of the Rawhide Saloon. A low murmur of voices and the clink of glasses issued from there, and to Bracken they were welcome sounds. He pushed through the swinging doors into the cool interior.

The hum of conversation ceased. Somewhere a pushed-back chair sent a squeal of sound into the taut vacuum. Then the stillness rushed back.

Grim lines warped Bracken's mouth. A humorless light flickered in his eyes as they made a sweeping survey of the room.

George Bond stood near the middle of the bar, a shot glass full of whisky in his hand. His heavy-lidded eyes gave out nothing when they rested on Bracken. Against the far wall at a wooden table, Ned Oliver, Al Linus and Dave Peek were sprawled in barrel chairs. Each man gripped five splayed-out cards in his hand. In the middle of the table reposed a small pile of red-and-blue poker chips.

All three ranchers were inveterate poker players, yet not one of them were showing any interest in the pot or in their cards. They sat stiffly at attention, their eyes wary. Bracken felt the miasma of hostility swirl around him. It was a thick, palpable force in the room. Nevertheless, he walked up to the poker table.

"Evening, friends," he said.

For a moment no one answered. Bracken waited stolidly.

At last Dave Peek spoke. "Evening, Tom."

Bracken's annoyance put a cutting edge in his voice. "I'm glad you all haven't forgotten how to talk."

"Oh, we can talk, all right," said Al Linus. "But only with our friends."

"Meaning you don't count me a friend?"

"Exactly."

A dark shadow, almost of pain, touched Bracken's eyes. Then he said softly, "Since I'm practically a stranger in Loreno, you'd better make the picture a little clearer."

"I'll tell you this much," Ned Oliver stated. "Hammer no longer buys drinks in here."

"That so?" Bracken asked, still softly. "Suppose you tell me why?"

Oliver alone failed to detect the growing

"Steve found you tied face-down over the saddle," Dale explained

rage in Bracken. The Crescent owner became bolder. "This town has changed in the time you've been away. The minute you walked in here you were putting yourself out of bounds."

"So there are sides?"

"Definitely. And you're on the wrong side." Oliver's tone was challenging, insolent. "If you want a drink, go down to the Ten-Up. They're not so particular."

Bracken's eyes grew hard. He remembered the Ten-Up as a dingy place frequented by hard-scrabble ranchers from the upper Tumurals, and the few nesters who had settled in the Bottoms. His words stung like a whiplash.

"Oliver, you're nothing but a tub of lard. Your mouth is big, and so is your belly. But you're not big enough to tell me where I'll drink."

A gusty breath broke from Oliver. Al Linus cursed; Dave Peek laughed silently and mirthlessly.

Bracken turned his back and headed for the bar. To the bartender he said, "Whisky—and none of your rotgut."

The bartender, Charlie Moon, looked toward the poker table, then back at Bracken, before shaking his head.

Bracken tossed a quarter on the bar, the ring of the coin on the hard wood setting up a shrill clarion in the uneasy stillness. He

pointed to the backbar behind Charlie. "That bottle marked Saddler's will do."

There was a scuff of movement behind Bracken, and Charlie suddenly found the courage to answer. "You'll get no drink here, bucko."

All restraint left Bracken, then. He had been pushed around too much and the anger that was in him had to find release. With a lunge he caught Charlie's shirt, hauled him up against the bar's inner rim, and slugged him with a short, chopping right. Blood began to dribble from Charlie's mouth and down along his chin.

LINUS yelled, and knocked his chair down in his effort to reach the bar. Out of the corner of his eye Bracken saw Bond throw his whisky glass to the floor and move into action. As Charlie went up on his toes to swing a wild haymaker, Bracken joined both hands in a firm grip on the bartender's shirt-front and hauled him across the top of the bar.

Bond was driving in from the left when Bracken hurled Charlie's half-limp form into his path. The bartender's weight caught Bond full in the chest and knocked him over backward. His head struck a brass spittoon on the floor. Bracken turned quickly, to catch a looping right-hand punch on the jaw from Al Linus.

The sting of the punch put the raw taste of blood lust in Bracken's mouth. He grinned savagely, shot away from the bar, and pumped a cruel left hook deep into Linus' mid-section. Breath whooshed from the rancher's lungs and he doubled up in pain. Bracken measured him quickly with a short jab, before smashing him with a right to the jaw.

Charlie, the bartender, lay sprawled in a limp heap close to the battered foot rail. Bond, dazed and shaken, was rising to one knee and fumbling for his holstered .45. As the Crescent foreman brought the weapon clear, Bracken trapped his wrist in an iron grip and wrenched the gun away.

Bond cursed and sprang forward. Bracken side-stepped and lifted his knee to Bond's jaw. The crushing impact of the blow snapped Bond's teeth together and spun him, unconscious, to the floor.

Without any loss of motion, Bracken whirled, put his back to the bar, and leveled the gun he'd taken from Bond at Ned Oliver and Dave Peek. Oliver had plunged up from his chair and his round, ruddy face was mean and murderous. Peek had remained seated, smiling, apparently unmoved by the violence taking place around him.

"Are you fellows in this?" Bracken asked hotly. "If you are, now is the time to make your play."

"You'll gain nothing with rough stuff," said Oliver, his big body in a slight crouch, his right hand near his holster.

"Answer my question, Ned," Bracken snapped. "If you're getting into the game, say so. If not, get your hand away from your gun."

Oliver glared, but slowly straightened and took his hand away from his Colt.

"What about you, Dave?" Bracken asked.

Peek brushed a speck of cigar ash from his shirt and smiled amiably. "I'm just a spectator, Tom."

"All right."

Bracken started to turn away. Peek's smooth voice hauled him around. "You've grown pretty tough."

"You can blame it on your friends," said Bracken.

Peek nodded. He took a long cigar from his coat pocket, examined it with a critical eye, stuck it in his mouth and lit it. After he had taken a deliberate puff and had blown a ring of smoke in Bracken's direction, he said, "You may have regrets. There are men who are too tough for their own good."

The lines around Bracken's mouth were grim. "Do you want to do something about it?"

"Violence never held much appeal for me."

Bracken stared at the fancy tooled leather belt strapped beneath Peek's coat. Though the gun was hidden from sight, Bracken remembered that the weapon was as fine and elegant as its owner.

"What's the gun for, then?"

"For protection—when needed," Peek told him quietly.

The man was smooth and hard to rouse, but dangerous, nevertheless. There was something cold and secretive about the owner of

the Lazy Link Ranch that did not encourage friendship. Though he frequently played poker with Oliver and Linus, Peek somehow managed to remain aloof and remote even from them. Except for his occasional visits to town, the Loreno ranchers saw little of him.

Al Linus was only now getting to his feet. There was a swelling bruise all along his jaw, but there was still defiance in him. "Well, bully boy, what happens now?"

George Bond was still unconscious. The bartender was beginning to stir and moan. Bracken gestured to Linus. Get a pail of water and dump some on your two friends."

Linus hesitated, glancing at Ned Oliver.

"Oliver's out of it," said Bracken. "Get that water."

Oliver reddened with rage, but said nothing. Linus shrugged, went behind the bar, and came back with a tin pail half filled with water. He spilled the water on Bond and Charlie. Bond moaned, and Peek rose leisurely and went over to help the Crescent foreman to a chair.

Charlie shook his rotund body like a seal, wiped a shirt sleeve across his face, and hauled himself up from the floor. His eyes were slow in focusing, but eventually his gaze crept around to Bracken. He gave a sudden start and retreated toward the back of the room.

"Hold it, Charlie," said Bracken. There was a challenging light in his eyes. "I'm still waiting for my drink."

Peek's laugh drifted through the room. "Charlie, give the man a drink. He's earned it."

"What's so funny, Dave?" Ned Oliver growled.

George Bond rose half out of his chair. "I'll kill you, Bracken," he said. His right hand clawed at his holster in a desperate, groping motion.

"Next time, George," said Bracken. "I have your gun." He turned again to Charlie, his tone insistent. "For the last time, Charlie, I'm telling you to get my drink."

The bartender went behind the bar. He took a quart bottle of rye down from the shelf, poured a shot glass full, and pushed it toward Bracken. Bracken took the drink in his left hand, sipped it, and let his deliberate, goading stare wander over all these hostile men.

He finished the whisky, set the empty glass on the bar, and abruptly decided to make one more effort to break through the wall of antagonism and silence. "Dave, what's the reason behind all this?"

Linus and Oliver and Bond shunted their eyes in Peek's direction. The Lazy Link owner took a deep drag at his cigar and answered, "Ask your brother."

Bracken felt suddenly futile and weary. Pushing away from the bar, he strode to the batwings. There he paused long enough to empty the five cartridges from Bond's Colt, before tossing the gun toward the middle of the room. Then he shouldered through the doors and out into the twilit street.

AFTER parting from Dale, Sherry Oliver was filled with an odd restlessness. Tom Bracken's return disturbed her more than she cared to admit. Thought of him was enough to give such a violent tug to her feelings she realized that the love she had thought she had for Ed Bracken was only a delusion.

What effect would Tom's return have on the precarious situation in Loreno? The country was teetering on the edge of armed conflict. The slightest incident could upset the uneasy truce that had prevailed during the last few weeks.

Bracken's coming might very well provide the spark to touch off an explosion that would involve every cattle outfit within a hundred miles. And though Sherry was the daughter of Ned Oliver, who had openly declared himself hostile to the Bracken spread, she found her own sense of loyalty wavering.

In front of the McClellan Hotel she exchanged a brief greeting with George Bond, her father's foreman. On the opposite side of the veranda she saw Gus Hyatt, Brad Mantle's ramrod. The Crescent and the BM spread had no use for each other, and Sherry began to wonder if there were any special significance to the presence in town of the two rival ramrods.

Despite Bond's air of lazy unconcern, there

was a veiled watchfulness about him. Does Dad know about Tom's return? she asked herself. Has he detailed Bond to intercept Tom if he shows up in Loreno?

Sherry debated, too, the reason for Gus Hyatt's posting himself on the hotel veranda. The hotel, the Rawhide Saloon, and other buildings to the north of them had always, by unspoken rule, been closed to Brad Mantle and his hardcase crew, an unsavory bunch. Rumor had it that the BM riders were more proficient with guns and running irons than they were with the normal tools of the cattle trade.

For Mantle to assign Hyatt to the McClellan Hotel was a gesture of defiance and contempt for the Crescent and its neighbors. Suddenly Sherry decided to exercise her own uneasy disquiet by riding out to Hammer, away from the sinister evil she sensed here.

A half hour later, Sherry rode into the Hammer ranch yard. As always, she was startled by the contrast between the neat orderliness of her father's Crescent Ranch and the run-down, seedy-looking holdings of the Bracken brothers.

The house, a three-room frame structure hastily put together, was already sagging in one corner. The walls, which had never seen a coat of paint, were pitted and scoured by the merciless heat and sun. There were three or four bare places on the roof where shingles had been ripped away by high winds. In heavy rains, water must drop into the rooms.

The log bunkhouse, the barn and the two corrals were in a similar state of disrepair. Weeds and dust filled the yard, and the only shade came from a single cottonwood near the house. Beside the well was a watering trough for the horses.

Ed Bracken, a slighter, gaunter version of Tom, was seated on a broken porch step drinking water from a battered tin dipper. He flung the dipper carelessly to the ground and came to Sherry. She took his extended hand and dropped lightly to the ground, offering her lips for his clumsy kiss.

"What brings you out here, Sherry?" he asked.

There was a slender rawness to his six-foot frame. But his eyes marked him more than did any other facet of his features. They were the same shade of dark blue as Tom's, but more restless and shadowed.

Brushing at the dust that clung tenaciously to her skirt, Sherry said, "Tom is back."

Quick apprehension fluttered in Ed's eyes. "How do you know?"

"Dale Parrish told me in town a little while ago."

Sherry paused as two of Ed's riders, Joe Larst and Ace Meusel, sauntered out of the bunkhouse and drifted to them.

"What's this about Tom?" Larst asked. He was a bronzed, square-jawed man with slate-gray eyes deeply set in a craggy face. The fact that he neither lifted his hat nor bothered to greet Sherry was a measure of the man's animal-like nature.

"He's back," said Sherry, glancing briefly at Larst, then letting her attention drift past thin, dried-out, nondescript Meusel back to Ed. The thumbs of both riders were hooked in their crossed gun-belts.

"In town?" demanded Larst, with intent interest.

"No," replied Sherry irritably. She was annoyed by the brusque manner in which the Hammer ramrod had taken charge of the conversation. "Dale and Buck Wykel stopped him up at Winchester Pass and sent him back."

"And he went?"

"So she said."

"That's damned interesting," murmured Larst. He exchanged a quick glance with Meusel, then nodded toward the corral. Both walked off.

A sharp frown creased Ed's forehead. "Where are you going?"

Larst answered over his shoulder, "To town. I haven't been to Loreno for a couple of weeks, and I have a thirst I aim to satisfy."

Ed gestured with his hand. "Some other time, Joe. If you get wound around a pint of redeye you'll be no good tomorrow morning, and we have a big job ahead of us, rounding up those two-year-olds."

"Don't worry about those cows. We'll take care of them." Larst kept right on to the corral.

Ed took a step in the direction of the corral, as if to remonstrate. Larst gave him a hard, challenging grin. Ed's right fist knotted, and his jaw muscles bulged. He said nothing, however, and slowly turned back to Sherry.

WHEN Larst and Muesel swung into their saddles and spurred away in a rippling cloud of dust, Ed's attention remained on the two riders until Sherry's dry question pulled him around.

"Who's running Hammer, Ed?"

Bracken's eyes turned smoky. "What do you mean?"

"One word from you and Larst and Meusel do as they please."

Bracken squeezed out a nervous grin. "I've been working them hard. They're entitled to a night off."

"Sure, but I don't like the way they took it." Sherry halted. "What's happening to you and to Hammer? In the last six months there's been a complete turnover in your crew. They've all left the country except Steve Martin, who hangs around picking up grubline jobs."

Bracken said, "Like everyone else, we've been hit by rustlers, Sherry. Most of the old bunch were just forty-and-found cow wranglers. When it came to bucking rustlers they pulled their freight."

"Or you let them go," snapped Sherry.

"What difference does it make?" he asked.

"A lot. Larst and Meusel are gun-slicks—the kind of hardcases who run with Mantle's BM outfit."

"Damn it, Sherry," Ed exclaimed, "leave me alone! Just because I've taken on a few riders who can shoot as well as ride, everyone in Loreno has Hammer labeled as an owlhoot spread."

"With considerable reason, if you ask me," Sherry retorted.

A quick resentment blazed in his eyes. "Now you're referring to the argument between Larst and Bond at the dance last month."

"It was more than an argument," Sherry insisted. "Larst was ready to kill George Bond—and just because George got Belle Graves to save the first dance for him. Everybody had turned in their guns at the Lodge Hall entrance, but Larst was carrying a hideout."

"I know," Ed said wearily. "Joe was full of whisky, and he's kind of crazy about Belle."

"He's crazy, all right," said Sherry, "but I'd call it gun crazy. He was just looking for a chance to kill George."

Bracken shook his head, his expression drawn and worried and placating. "Sherry, stop rawhiding me. The whole town is on edge. The cattle losses have gotten under everyone's skin, and your father and Al Linus are looking for the handiest whipping boy."

"Do you blame them?" demanded Sherry hotly. "Linus and two of his riders caught Gurdon trying to run off fifteen of Linus's cows. And Gurdon was on Hammer's payroll."

"But he wasn't," Ed Bracken protested. "I'd fired Gurdon two days before because I'd caught him using a running iron on a couple of Hammer critters. I told you that. Isn't my word worth anything?"

He looked so vulnerable and defenseless that Sherry came to him and put her arms around him. "Oh, I don't know, Ed. I'm all mixed up."

He smiled at her then. "You worry too much," he said. "When you hire toughs you take a certain amount of risk. I guessed wrong on Gurdon."

He bent suddenly and kissed her. She clung to him fiercely for a moment, then pushed him away. "What will you do about Tom?" she queried.

"If he comes here I can certainly use him," he said. Oddly, something almost like fear moved in his dark blue eyes, then slid swiftly away.

THE Ten-Up Saloon was a cheaper, more tawdry version of the Rawhide. Situated in the scrub section of town and scrupulously avoided by the big cattle ranchers, it had become the accepted hangout for riders from all the shirt-tail outfits in the mountains, saddle bums, drifters and, more particularly, the hard-bitten crew of Brad Mantle's BM iron.

At the moment, Mantle and the bartender were alone in the saloon. Swarthy and thick

bodied and hatchet faced, Mantle had a bright, hard look. Despite his bigness, he moved lithely and swiftly.

He kicked a chair away from a corner table and settled in it, then yelled for a bottle and a glass. The bartender brought a fresh bottle of rye and an over-sized shot glass, set them down without a word, then hurried back behind the bar.

Mantle took two quick drinks, then looked toward the bat-wings as Gus Hyatt came through them. Hyatt spotted Mantle and strode over to the table. Mantle said nothing. Hyatt pulled out a chair and sat down. Mantle watched him with a calculating shrewdness.

Hyatt finally shrugged and said, "Tom Bracken pulled in."

Mantle leaned back in his chair, his massive muscular chest filling out his gray flannel shirt. "I figured that."

"Dale Parrish's try at steering him away didn't work."

"Of course not," snapped Mantle. He seemed strangely pleased, and a light glowed in his eyes. "He's a hard one. Won't take a bluff. He proved that when he gunwhipped Hank Murad up in Billings."

"Yeah," said Hyatt, his crooked yellow teeth flashing, "I heard about that. Murad was no hombre to tangle with. You want me to get Bracken down here?"

Mantle poured a drink, tipped the amber whisky down his throat. "I reckon he'll come of his own accord," he said. "But if he doesn't, it's up to you to get him."

Fear muddied Hyatt's eyes. "I don't want to tangle with him."

Mantle banged the glass on the table. "Just bring him here. Larst and Meusel can do the rest. You get word to them that I want them in town."

Hyatt grinned. "They're probably on their way. I saw Sherry Oliver and Dale Parrish meet near Jansen's Mercantile. Afterward, Sherry got her horse and rode out in the direction of Hammer."

Mantle nodded. Then he pin-pointed Hyatt with a sharp glance. "Here's how we'll work it. You see that Bracken comes here. I'll get in a conversation with him, maybe suggest a little poker game. After he goes I want Larst and Meusel to jump him in the alley alongside the abandoned feed barn. He'll have to pass the alley on his way back to the hotel."

Hyatt looked worried. "You want him killed?"

"No, we can't risk it. But I want him smashed up good."

"Anything else?"

"Yeah. When Larst and Meusel are finished with him they're to tie him to a horse and take up into the Tumurals. And they're to let him know he's a dead man if he tries to come back."

"I'll tell them," said Hyatt. "Reckon I'll head uptown and keep an eye out for Bracken now."

AFTER leaving the Rawhide, Tom Bracken picked up his bay gelding and moved on down to the livery barn, where he left instructions that the weary animal be grained and rubbed down. He handed a silver dollar to the hostler and sauntered out into the street again.

Pausing on the plank sidewalk, he watched the twilight deepen into darkness. Light gradually faded from the sky and the first stars began to shine against the deep blue arch of the heavens. A cool wind, drifting down from the Tumurals whipped dust in whirling eddies down the street.

The sight of a restaurant close by reminded him that he was hungry. He stepped inside, idly noting the name "MAE RONALD" stenciled on the door. Taking a seat at the counter, he ordered a steak with potatoes, biscuits and two mugs of coffee.

The meal satisfied his hunger, but did nothing to appease the restlessness and discontent that churned inside him. The massed hostility he had encountered in the Rawhide still rankled deeply. In addition, he was plagued by his ignorance of what was going on in Loreno.

That Hammer was held in suspicion and contempt by its neighbors was fully evident. But the reasons were not so easily discernible. One way to get to the bottom of things was to ride out to Hammer and see his brother. That he had meant to do in any case.

Then the name "Mantle" uttered by one

of two punchers huddled at the far end of the counter sent his thoughts off on a tangent. The name, and the further words "Ten-Up Saloon," mumbled by one of the men, showed Bracken his next move.

Dale Parrish had hinted at some sort of illicit alliance between Hammer and Mantle. He decided to look for Mantle before seeing his brother. And of all the places in Loreno where the man might be found, the most likely would be the Ten-Up Saloon, the gathering place of riff-raff and undesirables.

Bracken paid for his meal, and moved down the half gloom of Main Street until the number of buildings began to dwindle and he saw the wide, murky plate-glass window of the Ten-Up Saloon.

Two ponies racked up in front wore the BM brand on their rumps. A hard glint brightened Bracken's eyes as he strode into the saloon.

The interior was similar to a hundred saloons he'd seen in towns throughout the West. He gave no attention to the pine bar, the scattering of rough tables and chairs. He was interested only in the swarthy, big-bodied man seated at the corner table with a bottle and a glass beside him. The man glanced up at Bracken's entrance. His eyes narrowed, then he went back to his drinking.

Bracken debated going straight to the table, but instead swung toward the bar. As he signaled the bartender, the bat-wings squeaked open and the round-shouldered, mustached man he'd seen on the hotel porch when he'd gotten his room there slid inside. He saw Bracken, shied his eyes away at once, dipped his head in Mantle's direction.

"Has Andy been in tonight?" he asked.

The man at the table glowered and made a cutting motion with the flat hand. The round-shouldered man about-faced and pushed outside.

A signal had been passed. Bracken was certain of that. The question about "Andy" told that delivery had been made. And also Tom knew he had found Brad Mantle.

THERE was a game being played here, and Tom Bracken sensed that he was the prize. Tension hummed along his nerves. There was an electric current in the air. He knew Mantle was fully aware of him, yet the big man gave all his attention to the bottle and glass before him.

Bracken looked at the bartender. "Whisky."

The bartender tilted a brown bottle over a shot glass. Tom drank half the whisky, made a wry face, and grunted, "Don't you have anything better than that rotgut?"

Mantle swung ponderously around. "Rotgut it is, Bracken," he said. "If you want a real drink, join me."

Bracken shrugged and walked over to Mantle's table, carrying his glass, which he emptied in the sawdust on the way.

He pulled out a battered barrel chair and sat down. "So you know who I am?"

Mantle grinned. "The town's been expecting you."

"So I found out."

Mantle filled Bracken's glass. "Dale Parrish tried a bluff," he said. "It didn't work. "I could have told her that."

Bracken sipped the whisky. "You know a lot about what's going on," he observed.

"I make it my business to," snapped Mantle.

Bracken leaned forward, his eyes boring into the big man. "Your nose ever get you into trouble?"

"Once or twice. I always managed to fight my way out."

Impatience tugged at Bracken's restraint. The need to get to the root of the trouble turned him blunt. "What do you want with me, Mantle?" he demanded.

"How do you know I want anything with you?" The dark eyes in the swarthy, sun-wrinkled face mocked him.

Bracken waved a hand. "Things have changed in Loreno. You seem to be mixed up in the changes—only nobody wants to talk. I mean to find out what's going on if I have to beat it out of someone."

"You talk tough, friend," Mantle said. "But how tough are you really?"

Bracken met Mantle's gaze unflinchingly. "Try me and see."

Mantle's lip quirked. After a leisurely interval he said, "What do you want to know?"

Bracken came right to the point. "What does Pothook have against Hammer?"

"Dale Parrish and Buck Wykel object to Ed's running with me."

"Why?"

"I'm supposed to be a cattle rustler," said Mantel calmly.

"Are you?"

"I've eaten an occasional Pothook or Crescent steer."

That revealed nothing. Many big ranches closed their eyes to the loss of a cow or two to nesters and shoe-string spreads which ran short of meat.

"Where are you located? Bracken inquired.

"I took over the Lacey spread."

"That was a hard-scrabble outfit in the Tumurals. Not much feed for cattle."

Mantle nodded. "True. But I managed to get along."

"In the short time I've been back," said Bracken, "I've gotten the impression that Hammer hasn't any friends in Loreno."

"Correct. It all started when Al Linus caught one of your brother's riders red-handed with fifteen of Linus's cows. Ed claimed he'd fired the fellow a few days before because he'd tried to use a running iron on a Hammer yearling. Nobody believed him."

"What do *you* think?"

"I figure Ed was telling the truth. In any event, the Hammer and my BM outfit are on one side of the fence while Oliver, Linus and the rest of the big spreads are on the other."

"Anybody else lose cows beside Linus?" Bracken asked.

"We've all lost beef."

"And Ed and you are being blamed?"

"Yeah. But it doesn't worry me."

Bracken shoved his chair back and got up. "Thanks for the information."

"Sure. Are you going out to see Ed now? If you two ever need any help, you know where to find me."

"Thanks, but maybe he's had too much help already."

Mantle's face darkened. His broad, flat hands spread wide on the table top. Bracken thought the big man was going to push the table into him and swing. Then Mantle turned calm and almost amused.

"Wait and see, friend," he murmured. "We'll talk again."

OUTSIDE the batwings, Bracken moved immediately into the shadows before stopping to survey the empty street. Only one or two shops still showed lights in their windows.

The meeting with Mantle had told him that the BM owner was tough and dangerous, and playing some secret game of his own. Mantle had been testing him, though the reason for it was not immediately apparent.

Far off in the hills a coyote howled at the night sky. Standing in the cool stillness, Bracken rolled a cigarette and set it aflame with a long sulphur match. He took a deep drag of smoke to ease his nerves.

When he struck off along the walk his boots set up a sharp rataplan that echoed up and down the street. He was moving past an abandoned feed barn when a sudden faint whisper of sound reached him from the shadows of the alley to his left. Instinctively he dropped his cigarette and slid his hand toward his holster. His fingers were scraping the worn leather when two indistinct shapes rushed at him.

Knuckles grazed the side of his chin. Powerful arms went around him, freezing his own gun arm. He was dragged into the alley. A sharp, probing knee jammed into his groin, setting him afire with pain. The muzzle of a down-chopping Colt raked the back of his head. He fought waves of dizziness and nausea, still caught in the bear trap of imprisoning arms.

The driving knee sought his groin again and missed. Bracken stamped his boot heel down hard, catching one man's instep and drawing an epithet of pain from him. The arms pinioning him loosened. But when he sought his gun, the holster was empty. In desperation he launched himself forward, head down, and caught one of his attackers full in the midriff.

The force of his drive carried the man into the wall of the feed barn. Then the second man was upon him, swinging a gun barrel. One blow caught Bracken on the left shoulder, numbing his entire arm. A second blow sliced a groove in his chin and slashed his lower lip

so that blood ran warm and salty in his mouth.

Doggedly he shook his head to clear it of pain. A heavy shape careened into him. Bunched knuckles sledged into his ribs. He propelled the man away from him with a vicious left hook to the nose. The crunch of broken cartilage under his fist made him savagely glad. Then a wicked flurry of blows to the body spun him against the barn's side wall.

As he sprawled there, a darker shape rushed out of the blackness. He stuck out his left fist, jabbing at the gray blob of a face. Then the other man slid in from the side, slashing at him.

Desperately Bracken tried to fight his way clear of the building wall. But the vicious two-pronged assault kept him pinned tight. He kept swinging both arms, though he realized that the steam was going out of his punches. All the while, neither of his attackers said a word. The silence of the onslaught testified to its brutal and deadly purpose.

The fighting was at close quarters now, wicked and altogether punishing. A hard head butted Bracken's chin. He retaliated with a heavy blow to the man's solar plexus that brought a grunt of pain. Then Bracken's head was beaten back against the wall by three bone-crushing jolts.

Redness whirled before his eyes. A lightning bolt of pain struck his crotch and he went down, doubled up in agony. A booted toe lashed his ribs. He rolled away, heard the scuff of a boot and made a feeble grab for an ankle. Even as he did so, a second boot cracked into the side of his head. Consciousness slid away from him. He was already floating away on a dark tide of oblivion when the booted toe slammed once more against his skull.

THE DEEP, black pit into which Bracken descended was cold and wet and alive with weird pressures. A great vise of pain was squeezing his insides. At times, he felt that he was being burned alive; at other times, he was locked in a vault of ice and the air that he drew into his tortured lungs was frigid.

Then, without warning, the conflicting sensations receded, leaving him marooned on an arid, empty plain of exhaustion. He opened his eyes and was blinded by a shaft of sunlight streaming in through a curtained window. There was heat in the sun, yet a cold band was clamped around his head.

He lifted an arm and his fingers came into contact with a woman's slender hand. His head twisted slowly around. Beside the bed stood Dale Parrish. She was holding a moist cloth to his forehead.

"I'm glad to see you back with the living," she said.

A mist gathered before Bracken's eyes. Dale's figure began to shimmer like heat waves dancing in the sun. "How did you get here?" he asked hoarsely, his voice sounding strange and unreal.

Dale smiled gravely, but her eyes, looking at Bracken's battered, swollen face, seemed about ready to cry. When she finally answered, her voice was softer than it had ever been with him.

"Tom, you're at Pothook. You've been hurt. How do you feel now?"

"Not good."

He was still having trouble focusing his eyes, and there was a dull, persistent ache inside his skull. Hot arrows of pain skewered his ribs and chest.

"The doctor said the beating you took would have killed an ordinary man."

Bracken tried to grin, but the very effort of stretching his cracked, torn lips brought its own special kind of agony. "They did a thorough job," he murmured. "I seem to ache all over."

Dale perched on the edge of the bed, took the cloth from his forehead, immersed it in a basin of water, then replaced it.

"Who was it? Do you know?"

He gave her a quizzical glance. She flushed. "It wasn't Pothook, if that's what you're thinking."

"I reckon not. One warning was enough."

The flush remained in Dale's cheeks. "I guess I have that coming. Do you feel like talking now?"

"Why not?" He told her of the fight in the alley beside the abandoned feed barn.

"You didn't get a look at them, or recognize a voice?" Dale asked.

"It was too dark to see anything, and there was no talk at all."

Dale shuddered. "They meant to kill you."

"Either that or make it clear I wasn't wanted in Loreno. I've had ample proof since yesterday that Hammer is pretty cordially hated."

"Not yesterday, Tom. That was two days ago." When Bracken gazed at her in surprise, Dale added, "Steve Martin, who used to be on your old Hammer crew—he's a Hashknife puncher now—found you up in the Tumurals tied face down over the saddle of Dave Peek's horse."

"Dave Peek?" Bracken licked his parched lips.

Dale replied, "Whoever beat you up must have grabbed a horse outside of the Rawhide to get you out of town. Peek was upset because the horse was his blooded mare and he'd intended taking her on his trip to the capital on business."

She walked to the window, then came back again. "I'm confused," she admitted. "All of us have good reason to be suspicious of Hammer."

"You mean the Gurdon affair?"

"That, and Ed's running around with Mantle."

"I wonder if Mantle had anything to do with that beating I got in town."

"It wouldn't surprise me," Dale said. "But, like the rustling that has hit all the outfits around here, you can't prove anything against him."

"Maybe I'll make that one of my jobs," Bracken said. "But first I'll have to get out of your way. For everything you've done, I'm grateful. Believe me."

He took her hand, feeling the slow, heavy pulse beat in their joined palms. A sudden, vivid, man-woman awareness sprang up between them. Gently he pulled her forward. She came to the edge of the bed, hesitant and half resisting. Abruptly he wanted to kiss her moist, full lips, to feel the surging warmth of her against him. But she freed her hand.

"I'm glad I was able to help." Her voice was trembling and unsure. "And I'm sorry about what happened up at the pass. I'd like to think I've been wrong about Hammer."

She turned toward the door. Bracken knew that although he wanted to renew a relationship that had once been gay and warm and vital, she was restrained by the tug of some loyalty as yet unknown to him. He watched her leave the room.

DALE walked out into the yard. Buck Wykel rose from a weathered tree stump. "For a girl who was intent on driving Tom Bracken out of the country, you certainly spend a lot of time nursing him," he growled.

Dale's anger flared. "What would you have me do, Buck? Let him lie out in the hills and die? After all, he was nearly beaten to death!"

"It just goes to show that someone else had the same idea as you."

"Who could it have been, Buck?" Dale asked.

The Pothook foreman shrugged. "It could be any of a half-dozen outfits which don't want another Bracken around. Too bad they didn't finish him."

"Don't talk like that!" Dale said hotly. "We've no grounds for thinking Tom is in on the rustling. He's been away for months."

"You sure have changed your tune," Wykel grunted. "What do we do now? Make peace with Hammer and tell them what bunch of cows to take next?"

"Stop it, Buck! I'm no longer certain Hammer is responsible for the rustling. Maybe someone wants us to think they are."

Wykel spat in the dust. "This gets more interesting by the minute." His manner was blustery, but behind his querulousness was a fierce and unshakable loyalty to Pothook and its interests.

"Listen to me, Buck," Dale ordered. "Everyone is aware that one of the Hammer riders was caught with a few of Al Linus's cows. It's possible the man was working for someone else. I say we should concentrate our suspicions on Brad Mantle. He has the owlhoot brand stamped on him. And if Ed Bracken is running with him, it may mean that Ed's gone bad. But Tom is different. I'd bet on that."

"Do you plan to notify Ed that Tom is here?" Wykel asked.

"No. Tom will make Hammer his first stop, once he's able to ride again."

Wykel nodded and, without further comment, headed for the corral where three Pothook hands waited to receive their orders for the day.

The morning after Tom Bracken's beating, Ed rose early, and hurried to the cook shack, and stuck his head inside. The cook, an ex-cowboy whose riding days had been abruptly terminated by a bad fall, turned from the stove.

"Breakfast ready, cookie?" Ed demanded.

"The coffee's hot." The cook pointed to the blackened pot on the back of the stove. "And the batter's all mixed for flapjacks. You want it now?"

Ed ignored the cook's query. "Joe and Ace up yet?" he demanded.

"Haven't seen them."

Ed scowled, then ducked into the bunkhouse. Larst and Meusel were just swinging out of their bunks. Hammer's other two punchers were operating from the line cabin in the foothills.

"You buckos sure take your own sweet time about getting up," Ed observed.

"What's the rush about?" Larst demanded. He reached leisurely for his flannel shirt.

"Hell!" Ed snapped. "You both knew I wanted to get an early start today to help Lodge and Hatten look for strays up in the cedar brakes."

With his pants buttoned and the gun-belt hitched around his waist, Larst reached for his boots. "We didn't get much sleep last night," he said indolently.

Ed's features squeezed tight with irritation. "That's your own fault! I told you not to ride into Loreno. Neither one of you will be of any use till you sweat the rotgut whisky out of your systems."

Larst's eyes turned a deeper shade of slate. He grunted, "Don't crowd me, Ed." The knife scar on his cheek stood out whitely against the olive darkness of his skin.

The arrogant challenge in Larst's manner hit Ed Bracken like a weighted fist. Sherry was right. These two hardcases were running him, instead of taking orders from him. But if he tried to fire them now they'd laugh at him.

RAGE churned his insides as he cursed under his breath and walked back into the cook shack. The cook set a steaming mug of coffee, flapjacks, and bacon in front of him. Morosely he began to eat.

Ten minutes went by before Larst and Meusel wandered in and took seats opposite him. Ed noticed an ugly blue-black bruise beneath the foreman's left eye. His nose, too, had been flattened, and dried blood caked his nostrils.

"What happened to you?" Ed asked.

There was an amused, half-contemptuous tolerance in Larst's cool rejoining. "A fight in town."

Meusel started to laugh. His thin, dry face looked puffy. There was a small cut on his lower lip.

Ed slammed his fork down on the table. "I might have guessed," he said. "Another of your drunken brawls. I'm tired of paying bills for saloon breakage. This time it comes out of your pay."

"There'll be no bill," Meusel said. "This was something special."

Both Meusel and Larst were smiling wickedly now, as if enjoying some secret joke at the Hammer owner's expense.

"What's so blasted funny?" he demanded.

"We're just thinking of the fight," said Larst. "Your brother, Tom, was in it."

Momentarily numb and frozen, Ed's throat turned dry.

"That's why you went to town, damn you!" he raged. "If you've hurt him I'll—"

He stood up, clawing frantically for his gun. But the weapon was only half out of the holster when he found himself staring at the round black eye of Larst's big .45.

"What would you do?" Larst goaded.

Ed's eyes burned into Larst's. A sense of outrage filled him. But mixed with the anger was a measure of dread that held him fast. He let his Colt slide back into its holster.

Larst sneered, "Any time you feel like burning powder, just say the word."

Ed shook his head in impotent fury. "What did you do to Tom?"

"We caught him in the alley near that abandoned feed barn and worked him over good," Larst told him. The Hammer ramrod's eyes burned with an eager yellow light, and his lips writhed in sadistic pleasure.

"You didn't—he isn't—" Ed's voice broke on a nervous whisper.

Larst said, "He was alive when we put him on a horse and headed him toward the Tumurals."

A great tremor went through Ed. "You've gone too far this time," he said. "I'm going to see Mantle about this."

"Mantle gave us the order," snapped Larst. "You fool, do you think we can afford to have Tom snooping around here?"

Ed swallowed. Then a set, gray stillness came into his face. "I've had enough of my deal with Mantle. I'm pulling out."

Larst leaned across the table. "It's too late to pull out, friend."

Suddenly Ed couldn't stand it any more. He stalked outside into the morning sunlight and crossed the yard to the ranch house.

He was sick as he had never been sick before. It was no mere physical agony; rather it was a deep-seated, blood-sucking illness that drained his body of vitality and dulled his brain.

He cursed his own weakness. If he'd had the guts to stay away from poker that had steadily taken all his cash and some of his cattle, he would not be so viciously trapped. With the threat of losing Hammer staring him in the face, Mantle's rustling had offered him a chance to recoup his losses. And he had found himself caught in a web of intrigue from which there was no escape.

Now Tom, who might have helped him, could be dying. And there was nowhere to turn for help.

THREE days went by before Tom Bracken was allowed out of bed. Even then the doctor insisted that he confine his activity to sitting on the veranda of the Pothook ranch house, or taking a brief walk. Restless and irritable, he was anxious to see his brother. But Dale made him hew to the letter of the doctor's instructions.

At the end of the week, however, Bracken decided he could try getting into the saddle. Dale went out to the corral with him, intending to ride along. She ordered Slate Cooney to rope out her mount and Dave Peek's blooded mare, which had been appropriated by Bracken's assailants. Dale had kept the animal in the Pothook corrals pending an opportunity to return it to the Lazy Link.

Now, as Cooney led both saddled horses through the open gate, Dave Peek and a stranger rode up. Peek quickly dismounted, and went right to Dale, pulling her against him for a kiss. She pushed away after only a brief contact.

"Is that the kind of greeting I get after being away all week?" Peek demanded. His handsome face was smiling, but there was a hidden edge in his voice.

"Dave, we're not alone," she said, color deepening the bloom of her cheeks.

"Do you think I care about that?" Peek swung half around toward Bracken, unable to conceal the surprise and displeasure he felt. "What are you doing here—and with my mare?"

"I'm a guest of Pothook."

Dale smiled. "You hadn't heard about Tom's being ambushed in town and beaten up, Dave?"

When Peek shook his head impatiently, Dale gave a terse account of what had happened, explaining how Peek's mare had been taken.

Temper simmered in Peek, ruffling his usual calm. "But why keep Bracken here?"

"He was too badly hurt to be moved," said Dale. "Besides, regardless of how we both have felt about Hammer, I have no sympathy for the kind of sneaking, cowardly attack that was made upon Tom."

Anger surged up into Peek's eyes. Then he got himself under control. "I agree with you completely, Dale." He inclined his head toward Bracken. "Sorry to hear about it."

Bracken's eyes searched Peek's features with an intensity that was disconcerting. Peek said, "What are you looking at?"

"I just wanted to satisfy myself that you weren't marked up."

Instead of being enraged, Peek seemed

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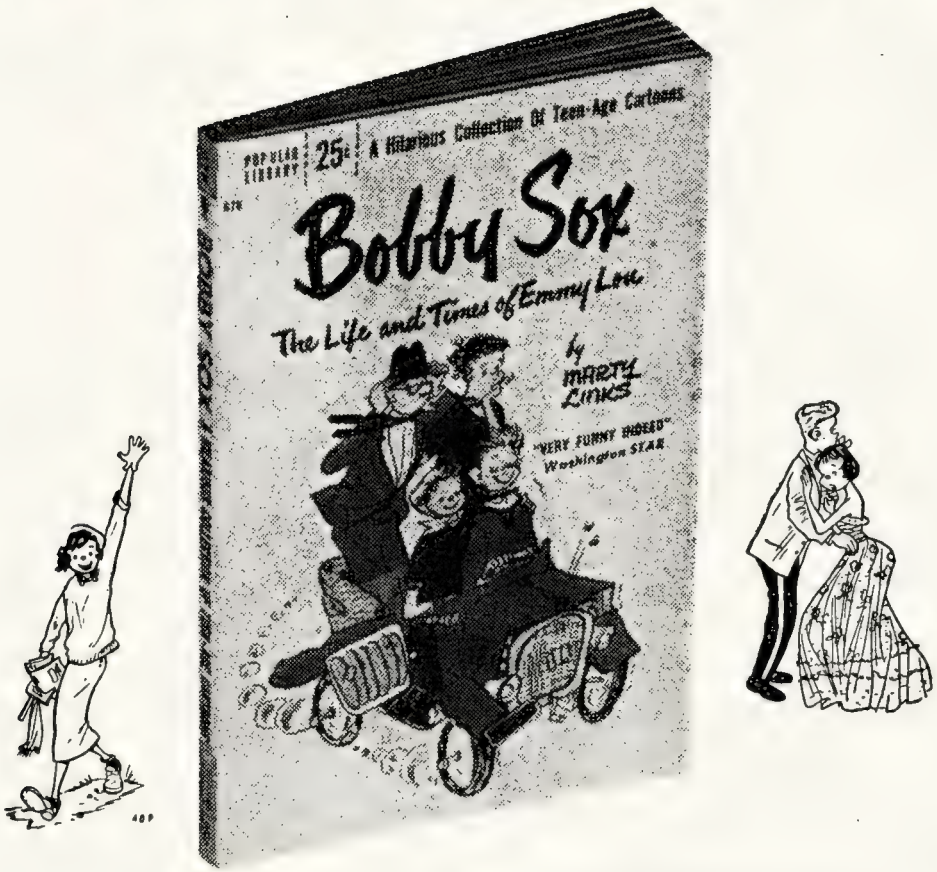

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amused. "You're looking at the wrong man. I don't do business that way."

"You mean you pay someone to do that kind of work?" Bracken inquired in a deceptive soft tone.

Peek refused to be baited. "I don't blame you for being sore. But I suggest you look further for the man you want."

Bracken's lips settled in a grim, narrow groove. "Just what I intend to do," he said. "I don't care which outfit is shielding them, I'll find them. When I do, there'll be another little party."

Dale took Bracken's arm, shook him a little. "Tom, you have a lot of enemies here. You can't go everywhere looking for trouble. Whoever attacked you may try again, and this time they may kill you."

"Or get killed themselves," Bracken said.

Peek, watching Dale, turned suddenly angry. "For an engaged woman," his precise voice said, "you seem to be showing unwarranted attention to another man."

Dale stepped away from Bracken. "Don't be silly, Dave. I'm concerned for Tom, that's all."

"Give me a little of that concern instead."

Bracken hitched up his levis. "Looks like I'm in the way," he said.

And odd feeling of loss and loneliness assailed him. Dale's nearness just now, the touch of her fingers on his arm, had sent a wave of heat beating through his body. But the sensation receded, leaving him empty of emotions.

"My congratulations, Dale," he murmured. "I didn't know. All the more reason I shouldn't have stayed here." He gestured to the stranger still in the saddle. "Who's your friend, Dave?"

Peek called to the other man, "I'm sorry, Gil. Get down and join us." The man dismounted and walked over. "Dale," said Peek, "this is Gil Fredericks, an old friend of mine. Gil, Dale Parrish, owner of Pothook and my intended wife."

FREDERICKS was dressed much like Peek, in dark trousers and knee-length black coat. Both were wearing white shirts with black string ties. Fredericks's thick red hair stuck out from his flat-crowned black cat. He shook hands with Tom.

"I had some business in the capital," said Peek, "and I bumped into Gil. We punched cows together up in Montana some years ago. Haven't seen each other since."

"Are you a rancher, Mr. Fredericks?" Dale inquired.

"I was, until six months ago," he said. "I sold my place in Montana and I've been taking it easy for a while. Now I'd like to get back into things again."

Remembering the smooth, uncalloused feel of Frederick's palm, and drawing his own dubious conclusions, Bracken said, "Good cow country around here."

"So Dave tells me," Fredericks replied. "Know of any outfits up for sale, Bracken?"

"I couldn't say. I've been away a long time and just got back."

"I did hear something about an outfit called Hammer."

Bracken's eyes glinted. "That's interesting. Is it up for sale?"

"I heard it might be."

"Who told you that—Dave?" Bracken's question crackled like lightning in humid summer air.

"Now listen, Bracken," Peek began, only to be interrupted by Fredericks's hurried explanation.

"No, it was just a rumor I heard around the capital." Tiny beads of moisture began to appear on the big man's brow.

A flicker of flame burned in Bracken's eyes as Dale explained, "Tom and his brother own Hammer."

"Oh, I'm sorry," blurted Fredericks, reddening as his confusion mounted. "I didn't mean to imply—"

Bracken cut him off with a wave of his hand. "It's all right," he said. "These rumors get around. Dave knows how it is."

Peek met Bracken's harsh gaze with a stony impassivity that barely cloaked his resentment. "Yeah, I know."

There was tension here, and unfriendliness, tugging at everyone's nerves. Finally Bracken spoke. "I was planning to take a ride. Will you folks excuse me?"

He moved to the corral, was about to lift

a boot into the stirrup when the Lazy Link brand on the animal reminded him that he had Peek's horse.

"I was about to ride your mare, Dave," he said. "Dale, you don't mind if I take one of your saddlers?"

"Of course not," she said.

"Keep the mare," Peek offered. "You'll be going to Hammer soon. I'll send one of my riders over for her."

"Much obliged," said Bracken, and proceeded to mount.

The effort of hauling himself into the saddle pulled a grunt of pain from him, and nausea roiled his stomach. He fought the sickness down, called to Dale, "See you later," and headed along the slanting slope of a hill at a slow trot.

He'd had the vague notion of riding straight to Hammer. The meeting with his brother had already been too long delayed. But the ten miles would take more out of him than be had to give. He would have to be content for now with a short jaunt.

The ridge twisted away through a thin stand of alder and jackpine. Now and then a cloud shadow drifted across the land. The sun was already hot, and there was the smell of dry earth and dust in the air. A bluejay's raucous call knifed through the morning stillness.

The feeling of being released from forced confinement, however, soon deserted him as he thought of the uncertain future. The situation was more serious than he had imagined. Wherever he turned he found the same suspicion of Hammer and of his own presence here. Even Dale was still not certain of him in her own mind.

He wondered about Dave Peek and the business that had taken him to the capital, and about his friend Fredericks, the cattleman with the smooth hands that had obviously never known the burn of a rope.

BURIED in his own somber reflections, he forgot the pain in his ribs. Suddenly the cry of a familiar voice pulled his head around. A rider flashed out of the trees. He saw Sherry Oliver's surprised, animated face. Then she had wheeled her horse beside him. Her arms went around him.

"Oh, Tom, my dear!"

The vibrant warmth of her body was crushed close to him. He caught the fragrance of her hair, saw the bright, heart-stirring magic of her eyes. Then she kissed him, clinging to him as if she never wanted to let him go.

The embrace left both Bracken and Sherry shaken. When they drew apart, a sudden constraint fell upon them.

"Tom," Sherry said huskily, "why did you ever go away?"

Bracken shrugged. "I'm just a fiddlefoot, Sherry," he said, "but I've stopped running now—although Al Linus and your father gave me to understand that the Brackens don't have many friends."

Sherry put a hand on his arm. She looked a little pale. "If only Ed—"

Bracken's eyes hardened. "No one's been anxious to talk. Do you know anything I should know? Tell me!"

"It's Ed," she murmured. "He's not himself, somehow. He seems worried. And all the old Hammer hands are gone. He has some hardcases he doesn't seem able to control."

"That's interesting." Bracken felt strength flow into him. "I was planning to go back to Pothook, the doctor wants me to take it easy. But the time for that has passed. I'm going to Hammer."

Sherry made a pleading gesture, but Bracken had already gone away from her. His mind was miles away, traveling the dark, troubled road that lay ahead of him. He kicked Peek's mare into motion across the meadow, leaving Sherry behind.

Hammer headquarters looked as seedy and run-down as Tom Bracken remembered, when he came within sight of the unpainted ranch buildings. There were the same bare patches in the shingled roof, the same weed-littered yard, the same dusty-leaved cottonwood at the corner of the house.

He had begun to believe the ranch was deserted, when the front door opened and Ed stepped out. "Tom, what the hell!" Ed shouted.

"How are you, Ed?"

Tom watched his brother plunge down the steps, his gaunt cheeks a muddied mirror of mixed emotions.

"Glad you're here," Ed murmured. "I heard about your being set upon in town."

"You've been searching the hills for me ever since?" Tom said caustically.

Ed swallowed nervously. "Well, no, but I—"

At that moment there was the sharp, scraping sound of boots in the hard-packed dirt of the yard, and Larst and Meusel came around the side of the house. Both pulled up short when they saw Tom Bracken. Their faces mirrored a brief, shocked surprise, then twisted into hostile intensity.

Tom's gaze flicked instantly to the purplish welt beneath the Hammer ramrod's left eye. "A little surprise, bucko," he said. "I'm back in circulation."

Larst tried to bluff it out. "Friend, you're talking in riddles."

"How would you like a lump under the other eye?" Bracken snapped.

"Go to hell," said Larst, and slid his hand toward his holster.

With a sharp kick in the flank Tom Bracken sent the mare charging right at Larst. The foreman fired hurriedly, the bullet slamming past Tom's ear. Then the mare's thrusting shoulder struck Larst and flung him off to one side. Bracken freed his feet from the stirrups and followed Larst's falling figure with a headlong dive from the saddle.

He landed on top of Larst. The bone-shaking jolt the foreman had received from the horse's lunge, plus the added weight of Bracken's body, knocked all the wind out of Larst. As he lay stunned, Meusel made his move. Gun in hand, he leaped at Tom to smash in his skull with a brutal down-chopping blow.

Tom rolled to one side. The blow, intended for his head, slid along his arm. Then Tom rose, brought a fist up from his toes, and sent it crashing flush against Meusel's jaw. The segundo, his eyes filming over, fell backward to the ground.

WHIRLING around, Bracken found Larst scrambling to his knees and lunging for his fallen gun. Bracken ground his boot heel along the tips of Larst's fingers. The ramrod uttered a shrill squeal of pain and dropped the Colt. With a kick, Bracken sent the weapon skidding away.

"All right, get up," said Tom Bracken. He was on fire with an impulse to destroy and maim. "I'm going to give you a taste of some of the medicine you gave me in town the other night."

Larst hunkered on bent knees, glaring up at Tom, then suddenly propelled himself forward. Head first he rammed into Tom's ribs. The sheer agony of Larst's hard head colliding with his battered mid-section turned Bracken light-headed. He reeled backward, for a second or two visualizing two wavering shapes before him where there should only be one.

Larst ripped both hands to Bracken's body. Bracken fell against the house and hung there while Larst lashed him with two more solid blows, before he slid forward into a clinch. He pinned Larst's arms to his sides, wrestled him away from the house.

Bracken heard a grunt behind him. Then a hairy arm circled his neck. Meusel had joined the struggle once more. Then Ed's strident yell knifed into the confusion of the fight.

"Stay out of it, Ace, or I'll put a slug in your back!"

Ed, gun in hand, moved into Tom's line of vision. There was a grim, frantic look on Ed's face. Meusel cursed and tightened his hold around Tom's throat. Ed's gun roared, and a bullet dug up dirt at Meusel's feet. He relinquished his grip and swung around, glowering at Ed.

"Stand back and out of the way!" Ed warned.

"Put that gun away if you know what's good for you," Meusel said.

Ed knew Meusel to be deadly with a gun, a conscienceless hardcase who would shoot a man in the back and think nothing of it. But, at the moment, Ed didn't give a damn. It surprised him. He kept his Colt at full cock, and Meusel slowly stepped back.

Tom, seeing that his back was protected, turned once more to the Hammer ramrod, just in time to take a smashing kick in the ribs from Larst's swinging boot. Tom went down. Slivers of pain tore through his

bruised flesh. He hugged his arms to his middle and weaved away from another kick that glanced across his shoulder.

Weakness flowed through Tom in an enervating tide. It was like an insidious poison destroying his blood cells, atrophying his muscles. The beating he'd absorbed at the hands of Larst and Meusel, combined with his week-long convalescence, had taken a heavy toll of his strength. He was in no condition to wage a long fight. If he were to win at all, he must be quick about it. Yet the exhaustion that gripped him was deep. It seemed to take him ages to climb back to his feet.

Larst, realizing that Bracken was seriously hurt, came in confidently with a looping left that nailed the top of Tom's Bracken's head. Tom went down again.

Larst stood over him, gloating with malicious pleasure. "This time your brother can pick you up with a shovel when I'm finished!"

(To be continued in the next issue)

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. What famous general, governor, Congressman and popular hero of Texas was called "The Raven?"

2. The Forty-niners gold-rushed to California. The gold stampede of the *Fifty-niners* was into the mountains of what Territory, now a state?

3. The National Bison Range, near Flathead Lake, is in what state?

4. Chief Yellow Bear died and Chief Quanah Parker nearly died from blowing out the gas in a Ft. Worth hotel. Chiefs of which tribe: Comanche, Kiowa, or Apache?

5. One of these frontier trails was an immigration route, one a stagecoach line and one a cattle trail: (1) Butterfield Trail, (2) Oregon Trail, (3) Goodnight Trail. Which was which?

6. When a cowboy speaks of "shotgun chaps," which does he means: (1) stagecoach guards carrying shotguns, (2) a type of cowboy leggins, or (3) irresponsible talkers?

7. True or false: Pat Garrett, famous New Mexico sheriff, also served at one time as a Texas Ranger.

8. Were the New Mexico *Comancheros* (Co-mahn-CHAY-ros) so called because they fought Comanches or because they traded with them?

9. San Luis Rey, San Juan Capistrano, and Santa Barbara are old Spanish Missions in what state?

10. Shalako (Zuni) and Yei-bit-chai (Navajo) are names of (1) Indian dances, (2) Indian chiefs, or (3) Indian villages?

——*Rattlesnake Robert*

You will find the answers to these questions on page 83. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.

IT WASN'T natural for tough Dan Tuttle to act love-sick . . and the whole town waited for the fireworks to start when he recovered. . . .

The Gunman

"You don't expect me to read all the time, do you?" Dan asked

Wore Glasses

By RAY G. ELLIS

WHEN Dan Tuttle strode purposefully into Doc Summerville's office, no one was more surprised than Doc. But when the gunman plopped himself into the chair in front of the eye charts and demanded to be fitted with glasses, Doc was dumbfounded. There wasn't anything wrong with Dan's intense blue eyes. Hadn't he outdrawn and killed a rat-faced gun bully only the week before?

But, with his pretty sixteen-year-old daughter, Dinah, helping him, Doc gave Dan an eye examination. When he had tried every kind of test he could think of, Doc said, "You don't need glasses, Dan. I never saw a better pair of eyes in my life. You never do any reading, anyway."

Dan looked up with those blue eyes, and his hand seemed to drop just naturally to the holstered gun on his hip. He said quietly, "I ordered a pair of glasses, Doc."

There wasn't much Summerville could do, of course, but give him what he wanted. He tested Dan's eyes again, just to make sure he hadn't missed anything, then told Dinah to get some frames and the box of lenses from a crate in the corner of the room.

Dinah brought back two small wooden boxes. Summerville opened the box of frames, and Dan pointed to a pair with thin gold rims.

"Those are the ones I want, right there," he said.

Doc pulled them out, shaking his head, and snapped a couple of lenses into place. Before he handed them to Dan, he said, "I don't want you calling me a fraud, so I'm telling you right now that these lenses are plain glass."

Dan might have been deaf, for all the sign he gave. He grabbed the glasses from Doc's hand and went to the mirror.

Dan Tuttle was a big, raw-boned fellow with no more spare flesh on him than a colt. Ridges of muscle bulged under his skin, but he moved with a good deal more grace than you'd have thought he would.

Two things happened when he put on those glasses in front of the mirror—a gunman was transformed into a student, and Dinah fell in love.

It was that pair of glasses that did it—it had to be. Until then he hadn't paid Dan any more mind than if he'd been her brother. Her sigh was loud in the still room as she looked at his reflection in the mirror. Dan didn't notice it, he was so intent on studying himself. But

Doc Summerville did, and he knew he might as well not count on Dinah to be much help until she got over Dan. This sort of thing had happened before.

Dan's angular face just wasn't right for glasses, and Doc opened his mouth to tell him so. But Dan had been pretty emphatic about what he wanted, so Doc kept silent.

Dan turned from the mirror finally and said, "Well, how do I look?"

Dinah sighed again and said, "Just wonderful," in a shaky voice.

Doc Summerville mumbled, "Hmm, yes."

Dan shelled out the money without a word, and walked from the office, shoving the glasses into his vest pocket. Doc waited until Dan was out of earshot, then said, "Now what in tarnation is he going to do with those glasses?" His voice sounded a little worried, too, as if he were thinking maybe Dan was going to use them for a disguise, or some such foolishness.

In answer to Summerville's question, Dinah said, "He's in love, Daddy."

Doc snorted and said, "Why, honey, he didn't even look at you. And by the way, don't you get any ideas about that ruffian. I saw the way you were mooning over him."

"He's not in love with *me,*" Dinah said. "It's that new schoolteacher, Emily Downs."

Doc dropped into a chair and said, "Dan Tuttle was lucky he was able to finish the fourth grade and—" He stopped, thinking, then asked, "Do you mean he thinks those glasses will fool her?"

Dinah nodded.

"Why, the minute he opens his mouth, she'll know," Doc said incredulously. "She went to college back East. She isn't going to be fooled by a trick like that."

"Yes, she will," Dinah said, and sighed sadly.

Doc looked at his daughter with a trace of pity. "Maybe you're right," he said. "They sure did something to you."

USUALLY when Dan walked down the street, timid folks looked the other way. Other people, like the sheriff, always greeted him—smiling, of course. But the day after Dan visited Doc Summerville's, even the most timid stared at Dan.

At first the sheriff thought a stranger had come to town the night before. But, when he squinted his eyes a little and studied the man, he realized with a start that it was Dan Tuttle under all that get up.

Dan strolled through the door and onto the sidewalk in front of the hotel. The gold rims of the glasses gleamed brightly in the morning sunlight. A brand new Stetson graced his head, and a black frock coat hung almost to his knees at the back. Of course, he wore no guns—at least not any you could see. Under his arm he carried a thick, red-covered book entitled "Law Cases."

The sheriff couldn't help grinning, and the snickers from various doorways didn't help any. But Dan Tuttle didn't seem to notice. His gaze swept past the sheriff like the man wasn't even there.

It was kind of embarrassing, in a way, when Emily Downs came down the street on her way to the schoolhouse on the other side of town. Dan's normally flint-like eyes just seeemed to melt, till he looked something like a hungry hound dog watching a man eat steak. There were some mighty fat grins on the spectators when Dan shoved off down the street toward Emily.

When he was near her he tipped his hat and said, "Howdy, Miss Downs."

The schoolteacher looked up, puzzled for a moment, until she recognized him. Somehow she kept her smile from getting too big.

She said, "Why, hello, Mr. Tuttle."

"Can I . . . I mean, would it be all right if I walked a ways with you, Miss Downs?" Dan was stuttering from the strain of using correct English.

She devastated him with a smile and said, "That would be nice, Mr. Tuttle."

Dan had rehearsed the first few words, but now he had run out of recitation. He fell into an uncomfortable silence. By the time they were in front of the hotel again, there was quite a crowd there, and Dan was getting more uncomfortable every step. But he stuck with it, even looking up once from studying the sidewalk to stare vacantly at the onlookers.

When they were right in front of the crowd at the hotel, Miss Downs said in surprise, "That looks like a law book you're carrying."

For a minute Dan teetered between laying into the snickering crowd with both fists, and sticking it out with Emily. He stuck.

They were past the crowd when he finally stammered out his answer. "I'm studying for the bar, ma'am," he said.

The crowd let go at that one. There was safety in numbers and Bill Douglass, a regular patron of the Golden Eagle Saloon, hollered out, "You don't need to do any studying for that."

Dan lost a step on that one and the crowd was suddenly quiet, but he picked up again and the laughing went on.

It took about a week before the town got used to the idea of Dan's meeting Emily Downs every morning and escorting her to school. It was a regular thing, like the coffee hour, to knock off work and watch Dan and Emily walk past. There were two reason for this—Emily Downs was easy to look at, and then Dan was always good for a laugh with those gold-rimmed glasses and the big red law book. But after a while the town folks got over being surprised, and quit staring every time Dan and Emily walked by.

NATURALLY, there was plenty of speculation on just how long the masquerade would keep on. At first the odds were high against it, but after the open-mouthed staring had stopped the odds dropped a little. Most of the town was now betting two to one that Dan would give out before Emily Downs gave in and married him.

He always carried the same law book, and Emily must have caught on. But she didn't let him know about it, and every morning, as regular as clockwork, he was on hand to escort her across town to the schoolhouse.

There was one person who never missed watching Dan and Emily walk by. Nobody knew what odds she was giving on the match, but Doc Summerville knew that Dinah was still in love.

When Dan and Emily went by she would study Dan, her face expressionless as if she were waiting for something. Doc Summerville watched her, and a pained look crossed his face every time it happened. He was powerless to help his daughter, and he knew it.

Then the spring roundup was over, and cowboys and ranchers began to drift into town looking for a little relaxation. Dan was in for a hard time and he seemed to know it, for his chin took on a firmer set. But he never failed to meet Emily.

Then Rod Elkhart came into town. He was a power in the county, for he owned the biggest ranch on that range. He seemed right for the job because he was one of those men that carried their authority where everybody could see it. He was big as only the outdoors can make a man big, and good-looking in a rough sort of way.

It just so happened that he rode into town one morning as Emily was leaving her rooming house. He didn't say anything, just stared, turning around in the saddle as he rode past her. Emily colored a little at the direct stare, then dropped her eyes to the ground.

Dan met her, as usual, a few minutes later, and they began their walk across town. Most mornings they walked down past the hotel, under the awning on the board sidewalk, but this time Emily crossed over. Dan followed faithfully, telling her of something he had read in the lawbook.

Rod Elkhart saw them coming, and began to fool with his saddle instead of going on into the Golden Eagle Saloon. Puzzlement was written all over his face as he studied Emily Down's escort. Then he recognized Dan, and a broad grin split his face.

"Well, good morning, professor," Rod said with mock seriousness, when Dan and Emily were opposite him on the sidewalk. He bowed as he spoke, and came up grinning. "I don't believe I've had the pleasure of meeting the lady."

Dan wasn't at all happy, but he carried the introductions off as best he could.

Emily smiled up at the wealthy rancher when she said, "How do you do." Then she put out her tiny hand for him to shake.

This time it was Emily's turn to look back, as she walked on. But Rod had already gone into the Golden Eagle.

DINAH SUMMERVILLE hadn't talked to Dan since the day he had come into the office, but she watched for him every morning and seemed to know just about

everything that he did. The next day when Dan came out onto the street, Dinah slipped out of the office. Doc Summerville was taking his afternoon snooze.

Dan didn't seem to have any definite destination in mind, and Dinah got in step with him, with the naiveté of a sixteen-year-old. Dan looked down at her through those plain lenses and smiled.

"Where's your book?" Dinah asked.

Dan laughed, and Dinah noticed how much older he seemed since that day he had come into her father's office. He said, "You don't expect me to read all the time, do you?"

"You mean that you actually read that book?" Dinah said.

Again Dan laughed and his deep voice was teasing as he said, "Certainly. What did you think it was for?"

Dinah said nothing, and they walked in silence for a time. Her heart wasn't as light as it had been, for she saw that Dan had changed, had grown more serious. He actually sounded like someone with a lot of book learning, and this meant that Emily Downs couldn't help falling in love with him.

Dan said, "It's about time you got back to the office. Your father will skin you alive if he finds you gone."

Dinah nodded, and they began to retrace their steps to the center of town. It wasn't until they were almost back to Doc's office next to the hotel that Dinah spoke. Rod Elkhart had come out of the hotel, looking well the worse for wear after a hard night at the Golden Eagle. He spotted Dan and Dinah and stopped dead in his tracks in the center of the sidewalk.

Dinah said, "There's that awful man."

She looked up at Dan and saw the set of his jaw. He said, "Here's the office. You go on in."

Dinah stopped in the doorway and Dan walked on. Rod stood his ground, his face expressionless as he said, "Isn't one girl enough for you, Tuttle? Do you have to rob the cradle?"

The few loiterers on the street stopped to watch what they figured was an impending brawl. The town had never quite forgotten how quarrelsome Dan had been only a short time before, and now they expected him to drag a gun out from some part of his strange costume.

Dan's eyes glinted behind the glass of the lenses, and his lips were almost white, but he merely shrugged and said shortly, "That's my business, Elkhart."

Before Rod could answer, Dan had turned into the hotel and disappeared into the dark interior. Rod stood with his mouth open, disbelief clouding his face.

The whole town knew then that Dan had changed. His old friends thought he had turned yellow. The rest of the town didn't know quite what to think, but they guessed they liked him better this way.

When Dinah got back into the office, Doc Summerville was awake and puttering around. He said, "What have you been doing—chasing after Dan Tuttle?"

Dinah said seriously, "He's really changed, Daddy." She told him what had happened.

Doc shook his head. "I don't know," he said. "Black's black and white's white. I don't mean a man can't change, but a man as stubborn as Dan Tuttle'll have a hard time being anything more than what he's always been."

"That isn't fair, Daddy," Dinah said.

"Oh, sure, he'll change as long as Emily Downs is around. But if she ever throws him over, look out." Doc folded his hands behind his back and walked to the window.

"And another thing," he went on. "This starry-eyed business with you and Dan has gone on long enough. You're getting to the age where you can't just go chasing around after men, especially gunmen like Dan Tuttle."

Dinah went to her father and said, smiling, "I'm not chasing him, Daddy. I'm waiting for him."

Doc Summerville shook his head and sighed. "Then you'll have a long wait."

Dinah waited.

THINGS kept getting noisier and noisier around the Golden Eagle in the next few days, as more and more cowhands drifted into town from the outlying ranches. Rod wasn't used to taking abuse from anyone, and it seemed like every time someone mentioned Dan and Emily, it was in a joke

directed at him. Rod drank heavily, trying to forget the school teacher, but it got so, finally, that she preyed on his mind constantly.

Rod was a man that had always taken what he wanted just because he was stronger than everyone else. Now he was playing second fiddle to a man who wore glasses and a ridiculous frock coat. It would have been different if Emily had snubbed him, but he was sure she had crossed the street that other morning just to pass close to him. Rod wasn't a genius when it came to women, but he figured even a moron would recognize the look in a girl's eyes when she saw something she wanted.

He saw her once when she was walking home from school alone. She smiled at him from across the street, and he stood there like he was nailed to the walk until she had gone by.

"Just like a damn schoolboy," he muttered to himself angrily. And he knew he had to do something about it.

It was Saturday, with the whole town and most of the county looking on, when things came to a head. Dan was escorting Emily around town while she bought a few things. It was a hot day for spring, but Dan still wore that long coat, though you could see he was sweating in it. But he must have figured that a man should wear his coat in the presence of a lady, and he was doing just that.

Somebody told Rod that Dan and Emily were coming, and he came out of the Golden Eagle when Dan and Emily were just a few steps away. Most of the inhabitants of the saloon came out with him or stood just inside the batwings, peering over.

Dan just kept on coming like nothing unusual was happening. Rod leaned against a column that supported the awning over the walk. His eyes were glittering, but his mouth hung loose in feigned nonchalance.

He said, "Well, professor now aren't you being fashionable on a hot day like this."

Laughter came from the saloon and Rod turned around, grinning. "Isn't he the dandy, boys," he said, then turned and bowed, sweeping his broad-brimmed hat low before him.

"Good morning, Miss Downs," he said gallantly.

Emily's eyes danced as she looked into Rod's. "Good morning, Mr. Elkhart," she answered.

Dan's face darkened at the words for a fleeting moment. Then he kind of shrugged, and more or less pulled Emily along with him, looking straight ahead. But Rod would not be put off. He shoved out one high-heeled boot and Dan, with his head up, didn't see it and fell flat on his face.

Again laughter burst from the saloon, and

PROUD PUNCHER PAPA

By S. OMAR BARKER

The baby looks just like his dad!
They hope that's how he'll grow up.
Each day new likeness makes them glad,
As it begins to show up.

But although Junior's smiles appear
Both wide and rather sweet,
For grins from ear to cowboy ear,
Proud Pop's still got him beat!

Rod looked at his audience for approval. "It looks like the professor has been practicing at the bar," Rod drawled. That brought down the house. Even Emily couldn't help laughing.

Dan sat up on the walk—just sat there until the laughter died down. Then he got slowly to his feet and brushed off his coat. The street was silent now, waiting to see which way Dan would go. He stood there as if he were thinking, trying to make up his mind, which was ridiculous. Most men either fight or they don't.

But Dan had to make up his mind. Then he evidently arrived at a definite conclusion, for he took off the glasses, dropped them to the walk, and ground them underfoot. The glass grated and scratched under the hard heel of his boot. He kept grinding until the frames were twisted wire.

The crowd watched all this in silence, not knowing just what to make of it. Most thought that this was the end of Dan Tuttle, the student, and yet they weren't sure until he laid into Rod Elkhart.

HE DIDN'T wait for Rod to unbuckle his guns, nor did he give any warning. He just stepped forward and threw one of his rocky fists into Rod's face. Rod saw it coming and ducked away, but not fast enough to escape.

Rod was a good fighter himself, and he ducked Dan's next swing and sent a hard right into the middle button of Dan's coat. The button flew off and Dan grunted, but he stopped for only a moment. Then he was stalking again, not hurriedly, but patiently, murderously.

Everyone knew from the moment they first saw Dan in action who would win that fight, but they stood watching, knowing the two men had to fight it out.

Dan drove Rod backward down the street. Rod staggered, and Emily flew forward, crying, screaming for them to stop. But she wasn't in time. Dan saw his chance and threw his right with all that remained in him. Rod fell like he was pole-axed.

Dan stood with his fists clenched, gulping for air, his chest heaving under his now dirty and torn coat. He watched Emily come toward him, his face showing nothing.

"You beast," Emily screamed. "You terrible, dirty beast."

Dan showed no sign that he had heard. She might have been talking to a wooden Indian, and this infuriated her. She slapped him and shouted, "You thought I loved you, but I hated you, with that silly coat and those glasses. You made a fool of me in front of the whole town, with that stupid law book. Now get out, you . . . you ignorant fool."

Dan didn't look as hurt or surprised as a lot of people thought he would. He must already have guessed that Emily wasn't for him. Still, he wasn't one to give up easily, so he had kept on with the hopeless pursuit.

Now he shed the black coat, letting it fall in the street. He looked up at the crowd for a moment, then turned on his heel and strode toward the hotel, leaving Emily to cradle Rod's head in her lap as Rod came back to his senses.

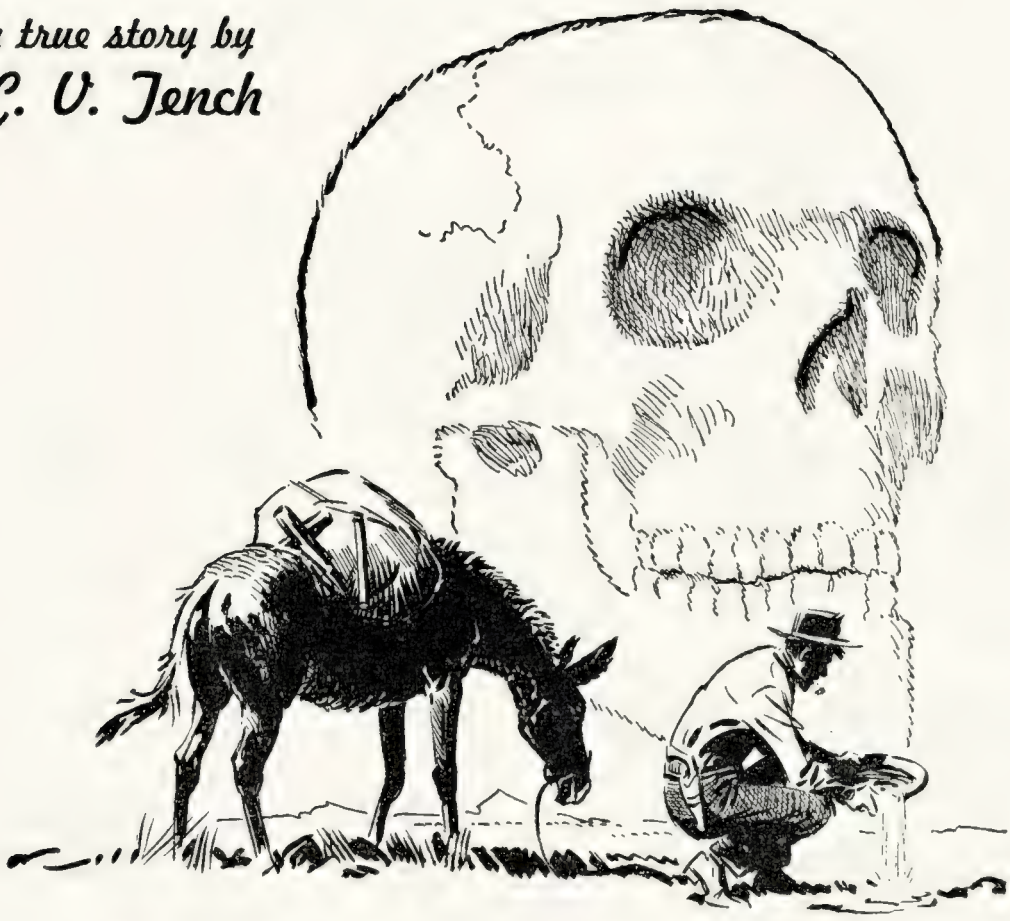
From the window next to the hotel, Dinah and Doc Summerville had watched the fight. Now, as Dan went into the hotel, Dinah smiled, even though Dan hadn't so much as glanced her way. Doc, though, wore a worried frown, like he was asking himself, what's going to happen now that he's shed his glasses and his coat.

IT WAS a big wedding, with just about the whole town there. Rod's face had pretty well healed in the two weeks since the fight, and Emily was a sight to see in her store-bought wedding gown. Dinah and Doc Summerville were there, and so was Dan. He even went through the reception line after the wedding, although he didn't kiss the bride like a lot of the young fellows did.

And what happened to Dan afterward? Well, the sheriff and the cowboys still greet him—smiling, of course. And even the timid folks look him right in the eye. There's something about Dan that commands attention.

Maybe it's the graying hair over the deep, intense eyes. Or maybe it's the fact that he's a successful lawyer who smiles at his clients even when they still owe him a bill. Or maybe, and this is probably the real reason, it's because of the pretty, dancing-eyed girl who's usually at his side—his wife, Dinah.

a true story by
C. V. Jench



Lost Creek Mine

SIXTY years ago, in November, 1891, at the Provincial Gaol, New Westminster, British Columbia, Canada, they hanged an Indian named John Slumach. That execution is still discussed, not only because Slumach died venomously cursing the gold that had brought him to the gallows, but also because he stubbornly refused to tell the source of the gold.

The Indian took with him to the grave the secret of the exact location of what has ever since been referred to as "Lost Creek Mine." Consequently, all that is known about this fabulously rich gold deposit is that it is located somewhere in the Pitt Lake Mountains about sixty miles from Vancouver, and is easily reached by boat or plane.

During the sixty years that have passed since, many men have

hunted in vain for the mine. More than a score lost their lives, and only one succeeded, a veteran prospector named John Jackson. But, like Slumach, Jackson took the secret of the mine with him to the grave, his early death resulting from the terrible hardships he endured during his search. But on his death bed Jackson did write a descriptive letter and draw a rough map, in an effort to help a close friend find the gold.

The only man living today who knows the full story of Lost Creek Mine is Hugh Murray, now in his eighties but still hale and hearty. As he talks about his memories in his home near New Westminster, the Pitt Lake Mountain Range can be seen in the distance. To reach them entails a forty-mile boat journey up the Fraser River to the outlet of Pitt Lake, a fifteen-mile boat ride the length of Pitt Lake to the mouth of the Pitt River, then eighteen miles up the Pitt River as far as it is navigable. From there the journey must be continued afoot.

The first indication of the existence of this tremendously rich gold deposit came in 1890, when John Slumach arrived in New Westminster, sixteen miles from Vancouver, with a packsack full of raw gold. Other gold seekers instantly flocked about him in an attempt to learn the location of his strike. Everything was tried—doped drinks, girls, offers of secrecy and undying friendship. Slumach remained tight-lipped, and presently disappeared.

Weeks later he again showed up in New Westminster, with as much raw gold as a man could carry. He boasted that he knew of a creek in the Pitt Lake Mountains where he "could pick up gold in handfuls, in pieces as large as walnuts!" But he still refused to reveal the location of his strike. And presently he again slipped away unobserved.

For a third time he showed up with gold and started another wine-and-women orgy. He was still in town, throwing money around, when a fishing vessel, trawling off the mouth of the Fraser River, netted the dead body of an Indian girl. On her person the police found gold nuggets.

Putting two and two together, they grilled Slumach. Would he, an Indian, venture into the wilds alone? Would not he, following the custom of his kind, take a squaw along as helper? Had this drowned girl been his helper?

Yes, she had been, Slumach admitted, and added that while they were drifting down the river on a raft on the return trip, she had fallen overboard and drowned. Although suspecting that Slumach had drowned her himself to prevent her divulging the location of his claim, the police could not prove this. Slumach was freed.

In the early summer of 1891 Slumach showed up yet again, with more gold. While he was in the midst of a hectic orgy the Fraser River cast up the body of another Indian girl. This one had a hunting knife embedded in her heart.

Police investigation proved that the knife was Slumach's. Other evidence also was unearthed and he was swiftly brought to trial, convicted, and sentenced to death. While awaiting execution, he admitted having murdered eight women helpers to prevent their disclosing the location of his mine. The promise of gold had made it easy for him to persuade each of them to accompany him.

AND then John Jackson arrived. Outfitting himself, he headed out into the Pitt Lake Mountains. When he returned, weeks later, he was a broken man, mentally and physically. But he brought with him a knapsack filled with raw gold. A few days later he left for San Francisco.

Years passed, during which many men hunted for Lost Creek Mine. None found it, and not all returned. Then, in 1912, representatives of Seattle financial interests called on Hugh Murray. They wanted to hire him as a guide, their objective being Lost Creek Mine.

They showed him the letter and map Jackson had sent to a friend of his, a man named Shotwell. Shotwell had sold both letter and map to another man. This man had set out alone, but had returned empty-handed, worn, emaciated, his clothing in tatters, with the precious map torn and partially destroyed. Discouraged to the point of hopelessness, he had sold the map and the letter to Seattle financial interests.

Jackson's letter reads, in part:

"After reaching the headwaters of Pitt Lake I headed into the mountains. I had been out about two months when my health became seriously affected by short rations and I decided to turn back. I climbed to the top of a sharp ridge to get my bearings, and found myself looking down into a little canyon I had not seen previously. With some difficulty, I reached a small stream I saw tumbling through the gorge.

Now comes the interesting part. I had only a small prospector's pan, but I found 'colors' immediately. I knew I had struck it rich. Going up the creek, I came to a place where the bedrock is bare. Here I gathered gold by the handful, some pieces as large as walnuts. Sizing up the stream, I concluded that, beyond all doubt, I had found Slumach's claim.

I traced the course of the creek to where it flows into a subterranean tunnel and is lost.

I then packed out all the gold I could carry in my weakened condition. It later brought me about ten thousand dollars in 'Frisco.

Now the doctor has told me that I am liable to go at any time.

Don't give up, Shotwell. You will be rewarded beyond your wildest dreams. Don't give up.

On the strength of the map and the letter, Hugh Murray guided the party into the mountains. They hunted for weeks, but failed in their search.

During the years that followed, others tried, and some of them failed to return. Because this cost the British Columbia Provincial Government tremendous expense in police searches for the missing prospectors, for a time the area was declared banned.

When the ban was finally lifted, an experienced prospector named Alfred Gaspard decided to hunt for the mine. Not only did Gaspard have a plane fly him and several months' supplies into the district, he also arranged to have a helicopter search for him if he failed to return within six months.

He did fail to show up at the appointed time, and the helicopter hovered over the territory for days.

The Royal Canadian Mounted Police, in planes and afoot, joined in the hunt. But when the police search was called off, in June, 1951, no trace of Gaspard had been found.

In view of the number of men who have lost their lives in the search, and the time, energy, and money others have expended, in the last sixty years, it does seem incredible that Lost Creek Mine has never been re-discovered by anyone except Jackson. Actually, there is a logical reason for the many failures.

First, it must be remembered that Jackson was a very sick man when he drew his rough map. It may have been more or less accurate, but one slight error could send a searcher miles in the wrong direction.

Second, the immensity of British Columbia's desolate mountain regions must be considered. A hundred men could spend their lifetimes combing the Pitt Lake Mountain Range and barely scratch the surface.

Third—as any prospector will testify—luck, pure, undiluted luck, plays by far the biggest part in any hunt for gold. A man may hunt for years and miss the one spot he is seeking—or he may find it the first day out.

Even today, well-equipped, seasoned men are out in the Pitt Lake Mountains determinedly hunting for Lost Creek Mine. Perhaps some day it will be re-discovered—as likely as not by some utter greenhorn, astray in the mountains, who will stumble on the fabulously rich creek accidentally while in search of a drink of water!

In the meantime, Lost Creek Mine remains lost.

KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 73)

1. Sam Houston.
2. Colorado.
3. Montana.
4. Comanche.
5. (1) Butterfield—stagecoach, (2) Oregon—immigration route, (3) Goodnight—cattle trail.
6. (2) Closed leg cowboy leggins, *chaparreras* or chaps.
7. True.
8. Because they traded with the Comanches.
9. California.
10. Indian dances.

"He's trying to talk," Marcy said. "He wants his wife."

THE MISFITS

By D. S. Halacy

CULLEN WAS ABLE to turn his enemies against each other . . .

but he stood a good chance of being killed in his own trap

FORTY, his face the dusty color of his chaps, Cullen Breckenridge sat straight and tall in his saddle, eyes pinched with the faraway look of the cattleman whose world is rimmed only by the horizon. This burned plain, clear to Trinidad, was X-R range, the spread he had run for seven hard years—run it and made it pay, despite the frock-coated gentlemen in Chicago who owned it. It took a big man. And this past year, the year it never had rained, Cullen wondered if he was still big enough.

The deep-chested gray walked in dust that splashed like liquid, and even the sky was the color of dirty straw. The drought of '87 had killed cattle and crops alike, and now it

burned his eyes and parched his throat with an acrid bite. Cullen spat dryly.

The road led past a settler's soddy, and it surprised him to see a gaunt man in overalls standing close enough so he could tell it was Jethro Horn. Jethro was the Missourian who had run for the legislature last term, and had been beaten by pompous little Judge Deems.

The granger waved a hand in somber greeting. Almost, Cullen ignored it. But there was something in the old man that made him lift his right hand in return.

"Afternoon, Breckenridge," the farmer said, his voice proud and his eyes full on Cullen. "Do you have a minute?"

The X-R boss reined up irritably. He had nothing to say to a granger; he hated them all with the same intense fury for being what they were. They had come to drive out the cattlemen. He got a grim satisfaction out of seeing that they had been harder hit by the drought than the X-R.

"What's on your mind, Horn?" he asked, looking down past the straw hat to the burned nose and the blue eyes set deep in a bony face. "I have business in town."

"Could you use any help out at the ranch?" Horn asked.

Back in the soddy, a child bawled and a woman spoke low, soothingly. Cullen lifted his eyes, then dropped them back on Horn. The farmer was hurting; it took courage, or maybe just desperation, to ask help of a cattleman.

"I'm full-handed," he said bluntly.

"Mending fence, maybe," Horn said. His voice broke slightly. "Digging tanks, or ditches?"

He was pleading, for the woman back in the house, for the kids, and for himself too. They were a tough lot, clinging like ticks to the burned-out land. But they weren't brave, Cullen thought angrily—just stupid, without enough to face facts. And Cullen's own daughter was sweet on young Horn!

"I have my own men doing the chores," he said. "Horn," he went on, slowly now, trying to get through to the man, "why don't you go on back?" He nodded to the east, far away down the dusty wind. "It's never going to rain again in this God-forsaken sink."

"It'll rain," Horn said evenly, and the quick shadow across his eyes told Cullen his angry description of the land had been sacrilege to the farmer. The man was a lay preacher, besides all else he did.

"It'll rain again," Horn said, "and we'll be here to thank the Lord. He doesn't forsake His own." He smiled then, as though to forgive Cullen, show him there were no hard feelings.

"Suit yourself," Cullen said. "But I have no work. Sorry."

He clucked to the gray, and settled again into an easy rocking gait. He could feel Horn's eyes on him for a long time. What was there in the farmer that got him so? The Grange itself had made the X-R spread possible, with the Capitol Reservation provision. Now it blamed the big ranches for everything from the weather to hard times. Horn was a granger, and for that Cullen hated him. But as a man— He shook his head angrily and tried to forget it. There was plenty else to worry about.

HE FOUND Judge Deems in his office in town. The lawyer was a hard-headed business man who spoke with the assurance and strength that had convinced the X-R's owners he was worth a hundred a month retainer to see to their interests.

"You look dry, Breckenridge," he said. Reaching into a drawer with an effort that made him wheeze, he brought out a bottle. "Cut a gulley through the dust with a drink."

"I *am* dry," Cullen said, "and mad too." He took a pull at the bottle and corked it. The liquor burned raw as he wiped his mouth with his sleeve. "Those idiots in Chicago want an exact *manual* count of the Green Basin herd!"

He tried to laugh. Dropping into a straight-backed chair, he leaned it against the adobe wall and hooked his boots on a rung. Outside, the wind still blew, and a fine stream of dust powdered in under the door.

"You'll be madder when you hear the agitators in the square," the Judge said. Reflectively, he poured whisky into a glass of water, swished it around and lifted it in a toast.

"To free speech," he said dryly. "There's a bellyful of it in Trinidad these days."

"Same old tune, I reckon," Cullen said. "Damn the cattleman."

"Right, and now Labor is in it too. The Grange is backing them to the hilt. They got to your freighters."

"The freighters? They didn't have the gall!" Rocking his chair forward, Cullen hit the floor with both feet, raising whorls of dust about his boots. "Slade Hertzog wouldn't dare! Wait 'til I find that devil."

"Shouldn't be hard," the Judge said. "He's looking for you. He's probably over at the warehouse."

Cullen found the boss teamster waiting for him in the agency. The dark mule skinner came forward, hard-faced and confident. There were half a dozen other drivers in the warehouse, apparently idling. But they were waiting to back up Hertzog's play.

"Afternoon, Mr. Breckenridge," the freighter said, bearing down on the *Mr.* too hard. "I've been waiting for you quite a spell."

"Why isn't that load of feed on the way to the Basin? I have sucker rod for the windmills coming, too," Cullen snapped.

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about, Mr. Breckenridge. You see, me and the boys here—" he paused, nodding to the others for effect—"figure we have a hike in rates coming."

"A *hike?* Hertzog, have you gone loco?" Cullen shouted. "I've lost five hundred head outright, and sold three thousand more for less than cost, and you want a hike!"

"Don't yell at me, Breckenridge," the freighter said sullenly. "I know how you people cover up profits. I've been reading in the paper about the killing the X-R made last year."

"Killing? We barely showed a profit. Man, there's been a drought. I can't afford the rate I've been paying you, much less more. Now, do I get that stuff or not?"

"If and when," Hertzog said. He pulled at his ragged beard, trying to stare Cullen down. "We aren't alone in this, either. The Grange is with us."

"Damn the Grange," Cullen said bitterly. "I have cattle to water, and I can't pump water without rod. Now get loaded and move out."

"Load it yourself, Breckenridge," Hertzog rasped.

He hooked big thumbs in his belt and leaned against a post. A driver laughed, soft and tauntingly.

Tight with rage, Cullen fought himself. His right hand rubbed up and down his thigh, wanting to ball into a fist he could smash into the freighter's sneering face. The agitators had done this, the soap-boxers the Grange was egging on. It was all part of the plan to pinch the cattleman, squeeze him dry, trample him into the dust, and then string the range with barbed wire.

Pushing past Hertzog, he went into the agency office. The little clerk was frightened; fear whitened his face above the clipped mustache. Pulling nervously at his eyeshade, he glanced from Cullen to the freighters clustered outside in the big shed.

"What'll I do with the feed and hardware?" he asked querulously. "Are they bluffing, or does Hertzog mean it?"

"Hold it a day or two," Cullen said.

Contempt and pity were in him for the clerk the X-R owners had sent out from the East. The man was a bookkeeper and no more, worrying for his skin. Then Cullen went out, past the grinning drivers and onto the street.

Pulling into the saddle, he urged the animal out away from the rail. Half blinded by his anger, he didn't see the high-wheeled "butcher knife" wagon drawn by its scrawny team.

"Whoa there!" the settler shouted, standing up to rein his horses.

Cullen's gray sprang ahead, avoiding them easily, but the motion wrenched the Stetson from the ranch boss's head. Cursing, he dismounted to retrieve it. He saw then that the farmer was Shelly Horn, the boy Marcy was sweet on.

"Damn you!" Cullen said as he remounted. "Watch where you're going in that baling-wire rig, hayseed."

The boy's thin face, a tougher copy of Jethro Horn's, colored slightly as he sat down on the wagon seat. But his voice was even, and there was slate hardness in his eyes.

"You own the street too, I reckon?" he asked. "Pa's against profanity, but I reckon

he'd understand why I'm telling you to go plumb to hell, Breckenridge. Giddap!"

He drove the wagon on by, narrow-tired wheels biting deep into the dust and leaving the double, slicing track Cullen hated. The wagons were like the nesters—misfits, built for different country. And yet they hung together, rattling across prairie, dragging through sand.

The ranch boss rode out of Trinidad slumped in his saddle. He angled to the north, so as not to pass the Horn soddy. The old trail was longer, but he didn't trust himself, feeling the weight of the sixgun belted to his side. The thing was coming to a head, and fast.

THE incident with young Horn had faded from his mind somewhat, but when Cullen came into the kitchen after splashing his dusty face with water from the porch pump, the sight of his daughter, tightened his jaw anew. He had talked with her and her mother about this before. Now he would put his foot down.

"Marcy?"

She turned from the stove, a smudge of flour on her pink face. "Oh, hello, Dad!" She blew a strand of hair aside and smiled.

He said sharply, "Quit seeing Shelly Horn."

It was as though he had slapped her. Her arms dropped uncertainly, and she caught her lower lip with white teeth.

"Dad," she said, and it was like a sob.

"Quit seeing him, understand?" Hating himself, he still had to stand up to her. "You'll have nothing to do with nesters from now on."

"Marcy, go to your room." Emily had come in behind him, and he turned to face her as his daughter left in wordless fury.

"I mean it," Cullen said angrily. "Don't *you* fight me, Emily."

She didn't answer him, and that made it worse. Instead, she set the table for just the two of them. Then, while he sat down, still grumbling, she brought the hot food to the table, poured his coffee.

"Emily, listen to me. That damned young hayraker nearly knocked me off my horse today, and cursed me when I called him on it."

"Who cursed first?" Emily asked. "You're a stubborn man, Cullen. Don't be a fool. Did you know some of those people are close to starving?"

He snorted. It was an old argument and Emily was a sentimentalist, too soft to see the logic of the thing.

"It's nature's law," he said, filling his plate. "They failed. Let them go on back where they came from. Help them this year and next year there'll be twice as many of them. This is cattle land, Emily."

"You're not cruel, Cullen," she said gently, "only blind. Will you talk to the judge? If enough of the legislature demands it, relief will be sent for these poor people."

"Was there relief for the X-R the year we burned?" Cullen put down his fork. "Who tamed this wilderness, Emily? Who put down wells and dug tanks? Does Austin give a damn how many head we lose to these farmers? It's survival, and they don't belong—they and their rickety wagons."

It was then the idea came to him, all the pieces falling together with a bang. Why hadn't thought of the wagons before?

"Cullen?" Emily eyed him with concern. "Are you all right?" She got the coffee pot from the stove and refilled his cup, her hand resting lightly on his shoulder while she did.

"All right? I'm fine!" he said excitedly. He got up from the table, stilled her questions. "You want to help them? That's fine with me. We'll kill two birds with that same stone, Emily. I'll be back in a while."

"Cullen?"

But he left her in the kitchen. There'd be time to tell her when he got back from Horn's soddy. They wanted work, did they? There *was* work they could do, after all.

IT WAS worth it, just to see the looks on the faces of Hertzog and the other freighters. Horn had rounded up four wagons besides his own, rigged sideboards on them, and showed up at the warehouse by noon. The drivers were gaunt, quiet men, thin as the animals they drove. Hollow-eyed with hunger, they listened to Cullen, then nodded to show they understood.

"All right, Brock," Cullen told the little clerk, "let them have the stuff. Remember

now, you men, I'm paying you the same rate I paid Hertzog. But anything lost or damaged comes out of your pay."

"Nothing will be lost," Jethro Horn said. "We hauled big loads clear out here from Missouri not so long ago."

Cullen said, "Load that sucker rod and the rest of the windmill gear all on your wagon, Horn."

He'd let Horn earn his money. The pay was by the mile, and the trip to the Basin, where the windmill gear was to be delivered, was twice as rough as the same distance to the home ranch. But there was no protest from the nester.

As Cullen rode off, Horn and the rest were struggling with the heavy crates and sacks. Cullen grinned. Then Hertzog walked into the street and called to him.

"You can't do this, Breckenridge," the freighter said angrily. He turned to spit, sullen-faced and mean-eyed. Cullen looked beyond him to the other drivers. They didn't seem as cocky now as they had in the warehouse when Hertzog had delivered his ultimatum.

"Why not?" Cullen said, and spurred on by, making the burly freighter give ground.

Behind him, the rattle of wagons being loaded was a good sound. Had Hertzog been just talking, or would the freighters strike back? He doubted they would, but if they did it was Horn's lookout. He was no fool; he knew why Cullen had given him the job. And if it got rough, it was only part of a rough country. Should Horn come out hindmost, that was his problem.

Cullen was in Deems's office when the sheriff came in. He was a heavy man, too big now to button the vest that carried his star. He had ridden once for the X-R, but these days he seldom saddled his mare. A frown creased his forehead under his pushed-back hat.

"Do you know what you're doing, Cullen?" he asked bluntly, jerking his head in the direction of the warehouse. "Hertzog doesn't like it a bit."

"Hertzog doesn't pay my wages, Cart," Cullen said. "Is there anything illegal about it? I figured it was downright decent of me, to tell you the truth. I thought you'd appreciate it, being practically a town man yourself."

The sheriff colored. "Just go easy, that's all," he said as he left.

"What's he sweating about?" Cullen asked. "When a man gets fat, he gets lazy."

"You might have a bear by the tail, at that," Deems said. "But I'm with you. Are you going home now? Remember me to Emily and Marcy."

Cullen met the four nesters who had hauled loads to the ranch, and paid them on the spot. Something like shame twitched in him as he saw their eyes light up at cash that could mean their hanging on a little longer. When they thanked him gruffly, he nodded and rode on for home.

Feeling good about turning the tables on Hertzog, he unsaddled the gray and turned him into the stubble that served as pasture. The big teamster was all bluff. In a few days he'd doubtless be begging for the contract back, and at the old rate. When he did, Cullen would let him worry a while before hiring him again.

Emily had waited dinner for him, and Marcy ate with them, keeping her eyes on her plate even when he spoke to her. It hurt him that he couldn't make her see he was thinking only of her good. The Horn boy was no husband for a cattleman's daughter. George Cox, now, his foreman, would make a fine son-in-law. But Marcy couldn't see him for sour apples.

"I hope there's no trouble," Emily said in a subdued voice.

"Trouble?" Cullen said good-naturedly.

"About the freight," she said. "I'm glad you gave them the work, of course, but I'd hate it if anything happened."

Cullen said, "You can't please a woman, I reckon. Emily, you stick to baking pies like this, and leave the worrying to me, will you?"

WHILE the women did the dishes, he went out onto the porch to light his pipe and sit in the creaking swing. In his office there was a stack of reports waiting, unanswered mail from Chicago, and the monthly auditing to take care of. But he sat, swinging slowly back and forth in the cool darkness.

He could hear the herd over at the troughs, the sound soft and easy in the distance. And then he caught another sound, the creak and rattle of loose wheels. As it drew nearer he stood up, took the pipe from his mouth, and moved across the porch to the steps.

The wagon came in sight, and he stood holding to the railing, knocking the bowl of his pipe on the smooth wood. It was a nester's rig. He frowned, wondering who would be coming out at this time of night. The wagon came into the ranch yard.

"Better take the .44's—.45's are too heavy."

"Hello," Cullen called. "Over here." He went down the steps, hearing the kitchen door open behind him.

"Whoa," the wagon driver said in a thin, raspy voice.

It was Jethro Horn, the nester who had driven the load to the Basin. Frowning, Cullen looked into the wagon bed. It was empty. The man must have delivered his load and come by, eager for his money.

"Your stuff's at the Basin," the nester said, his voice still oddly thin. "Somebody—freighter—"

Horn pitched forward, and would have fallen from the wagon if Cullen hadn't braced him up. From the porch Emily cried out, and the two women hurried down the steps.

Cullen shouted for his foreman. Fending off the two women, he got Horn stretched out on the seat, then saw the hole in the middle of his hickory shirt. The nester was still bleeding.

"I knew it," Emily whispered. "Cullen, is he dead?"

"Emily, be quiet. Go get some gauze, and the whisky jug."

"It's Shelly's father," Marcy said.

The foreman came across the yard, still buttoning his shirt. "It's Horn," Cullen told him as they lifted the man into the bed of the wagon. "I'm going to take him to the doctor."

"Right," Cox said, his face blank in the faint lamplight from the kitchen. "Let me get my gun."

Emily and Marcy climbed into the wagon. Marcy cradled the nester's head in her lap while Emily covered the wound with folded bandage to staunch the dark flow.

Cullen couldn't rouse the nester enough to get him to take a swallow from the jug. Tensely, he felt for a pulse, found it faintly throbbing in the big wrist. Then the foreman was back, and swung up onto the seat. He had his gunbelt and hat now, ready to go.

"All right," Cullen said, climbing down. "You women stay here." He reached up for Emily, saw her shake her head.

"We'll go along," she said, and he knew there was no point in arguing.

Cox slapped reins to the team as Cullen joined him on the seat. There was something on the floor at their feet, and Cullen bent to lift the Henry rifle to his lap. Somehow they didn't fit together, the gaunt Horn and the gun.

They drove in silence, and there was time to think on the way in—of Hertzog, and his threats. This was what he had meant, what the sheriff had meant. But was it Cullen's fault? When they patched the old man up, Horn could tell them who had waylaid him. The man would be jailed and tried. There was law and order; the X-R had seen to that.

THEY clattered into Trinidad, lathered horses drawing up at the doctor's shingle on Main Street. Cullen was off and running before the wagon stopped. Beating his fist on the door, he yelled for the doctor.

There was a muffled curse inside and the door swung open, framing the shirt-sleeved man in yellow light. He recognized Cullen, then glanced at the wagon.

"The nester, Horn," Cullen said. "He's shot in the chest, and unconscious."

The doctor whirled, reached for his bag, and shouted to Cullen to carry the old man in. As the rancher turned from the door, Marcy cried out.

"He's trying to talk," she said. "He wants his wife."

Cullen sighed out his relief, and then, gently, he and George carried the nester inside. Emily and Marcy went to the hotel to wait in the lobby, but Cullen stayed until the doctor finished up. The old man was still breathing, raspily but steadily.

"He'll make it," the doctor said.

Then the door opened and the sheriff came in. He looked first at Horn's unconscious figure, then turned to Cullen. Sighing heavily, rubbed at his eyes.

"Are you satisfied now?" he asked in the voice of a man much put upon.

"Satisfied? What do you mean?" Cullen demanded. "*I* didn't shoot him!" He looked quickly at the others, the doctor, Deems, his foreman.

"You might just as well have," the sheriff said.

Cullen started forward, but the judge caught him from one side and Cox moved in from the other. "You're lucky you have that star, Cart," Cullen told the law man. "Awfully lucky." He was shaking now.

"It's a matter of opinion," the sheriff said stiffly. "I hear he talked to you."

"He said Hertzog shot him," Cullen said quickly. The nester hadn't said exactly that, but—

"Hertzog was playing cards in the saloon 'til thirty minutes ago," the sheriff said, almost triumphantly.

"Then it must have been one of the other drivers," Cullen said angrily. He'd trapped himself by rushing headlong. "They'd have a motive."

"Lots of people would have a motive," the sheriff said. He walked toward the door of the undertaker's. "Can you deny you'd like to get rid of a nester, Cullen?"

"Watch your talk," Judge Deems said. "The X-R has done a lot for you, and don't you forget it!"

"The X-R doesn't pay me a retainer," the sheriff said. "I have the facts; you can leave the law work to me." He banged out into the night.

Deems let Cullen go. "Easy," he said, "don't make it any worse. Do you plan to go out to Horn's place, or do you want me to take care of it?"

The temptation was strong, but Cullen shook his head. He'd clean up his own muck; he always had. Glancing back once at the scrawny figure on the cot, he went with the others out onto the board walk.

"George, you take my wife and daughter back home, will you? Tell them I'll be along shortly."

He didn't want to face them right now. The foreman nodded, and went across the street toward the hotel.

"My gelding's in the stable," the judge said, lifting a sixgun from his belt. "Take this, too. Did all the stuff get to the ranch?"

"Yes," Cullen said. "He was shot afterward. I'll bring your horse back tomorrow, and we'll talk about Hertzog then."

He left the judge and walked the block to the livery stable. The sleepy hostler grumbled until he recognized Cullen, and then subsided. On the gelding, Cullen rode out of the sleeping town. He dreaded the mission he had, but he sat straight in the saddle. The thing had to be done.

A crescent of moon was low and orange on the horizon as he rode up to the Horn soddy. It was still as a grave, the only sound that of the horse's hoofs and the dry creak of leather. But there was a light in one window. At least he wouldn't have to rouse them.

Swinging down at the door, he rapped lightly. Inside, there was the snort of someone coming awake, and the sound of feet hitting the floor.

"Pa, that you?" The door opened wide, and young Shelly Horn stared down at Cullen.

"I thought it was my father," he said in confusion. "He's late getting back from that hauling job." The boy's eyes were questioning now, probing Cullen's for information.

"Your father's been shot," he said bluntly. "He's badly hurt." Cullen told him quickly what had happened.

There was a noise back of the stiff figure of Shelly, and a woman's voice called, "Shelly, is that Pa back? Pa, what kept you?"

Cullen could see her then as she moved to the door, a tired-looking woman in a gingham dress.

"Pa's hurt," the boy said, dully as though he didn't believe what he was saying. "Now, Ma!"

HE CAUGHT her as she staggered back. The woman's sobbing brought a rasping pain to Cullen's chest. She was hysterical, eyes wide and bright as her son sought to quiet her.

"Julie, come get Ma," the boy yelled. "Charlie, you go get that mule ready for me to ride into town."

The woman sagged to the floor, moaning now, and the girl clung to her. Shelly Horn stepped outside, pulling the door in back of him.

"I'm sorry," Cullen said. "The X-R will pay for the doctoring, and I have the wages here for the hauling your father did." He counted the money out in the boy's hand, looked into the stricken eyes. "It wasn't my fault," he said. "The freighters—"

"Sure, Mr. Breckenridge," the boy said. "Don't apologize. We knew how things were when Pa took the contract. Like you say, it can't be charged to you. You're a smart man." He swallowed then, looking down at the bills in his hand.

"Maybe you figure you have us scared off for good now," he went on, "but you're wrong, Mr. Breckenridge. If you have any more gear to haul, come to me. I'll haul it. It's a good gamble for both of us. I need the money, and you'd like to get rid of me because I aim to keep seeing Marcy."

The challenge stung Cullen, and for a second his anger flared hot. Then it was like seeing his own face in a dark mirror. The boy had courage, more than Cullen had credited him with. With his father shot, he'd still run the risk for the money it would bring. And he was daring Cullen for the chance. Like he said, it was a good gamble. For a moment the rancher weighed it; then he shook his head.

"No," he said, "there'll be no more freight hauled till I settle this thing. Look, I have a couple calves you could—"

"I don't want your charity," Shelly said harshly, shaking his head. "You paid your debt. Now get off my land."

It was there in that word "my." Get off *my* land, he'd said. He was tough and hard, like Cullen himself was. And, wanting to lash back at the boy, Cullen could still admire his spirit.

"All right," he said wearily, "I'm going. I'm—sorry, Horn."

The boy said nothing, and Cullen mounted the gelding, pulling his head around for the road and rowelling him gently. He was nearly out of Horn's yard when something slapped him, hard, on the right shoulder. As he spun, falling from the saddle, he heard the shot, as though it were part of the blow. And then he lay in the sand, listening to the pound of the panicked horse's hoofs as the animal fled.

There was no pain, only a dizziness in which his ears rang loudly as if he were hearing echoes of the shot. He tried to reach the gun Deems had lent him, but he was lying on it and his whole body felt paralyzed.

"Breckenridge?"

The sharp sound of young Horn's voice made Cullen twist his head. His senses were coming back now and with them the thought that the nester had fooled him, had shot him from behind. But how? The wound was in Cullen's right shoulder, the one away from the soddy.

"You'll regret just winging me, boy," Cullen answered. He had rolled his body enough now to reach for the gun with his left hand.

"I didn't—"

Horns words were lost in the crash of a second shot, and sand geysered a foot from Cullen's face, cutting him and filling his mouth. Half blinded, he could still tell the shot hadn't come from the house.

"Get in the house, kid!" someone called hoarsely from the road. "You can stay out of this if you keep your nose clean."

As a third shot ricocheted close to Cullen, he knew it was Hertzog. The freighter must have trailed him from town.

As Cullen sought to make out Hertzog in the faint moonlight, the door to the shack slammed. There was a sudden chill of aloneness in Cullen now. Horn was saving his own skin, probably glad of what was happening. Yet Hertzog was clever; this way the young nester would be blamed for shooting Cullen for revenge.

"I know you're playing possum, Breckenridge," the freighter yelled. "I saw you move. But you won't be moving any more when I leave."

Cullen could hear the sound of clothes scraping sand, but he could see nothing. Probably the man was in the shallow ditch alongside the road. Hertzog held the high cards.

Cullen was sweating now, in spite of the empty cold in the pit of his stomach. The judge's gun was like ice in his hand.

Then the door opened again, and Cullen had to check a wild impulse to glance back over his shoulder.

"I'm covering you, mister," Shelly Horn said loudly. "I can see you over by the pile of rock."

"Don't be a fool!" Hertzog roared. "Get back in there before I blast you, too!"

In the silence that followed, Cullen could hear the boy draw in his breath. Then he fired, the broad blast of his shotgun ripping the dark apart.

Fool kid! Cullen raged. A shotgun, at that distance!

He saw the flash of Hertzog's gun, then aimed his own and fired, a fast echo to the other shot. He saw the boy's reasoning then, but Hertzog couldn't have missed either, with Shelly Horn framed in the light of his soddy door.

Yet the boy walked on past Cullen, the gun to his shoulder, the second barrel blasting toward the shadow that fired raggedly from the cover of the ditch. And after that, Cullen's face eased down into the sand. He was tired, terribly tired.

THEY had him on a pallet in the doctor's office, back in Trinidad, when he came to. Shelly was there, not seeming to mind the fact that his leg was bound up, because Marcy was there too—along with Emily, the sheriff, Judge Deems, and a lot of others. The sheriff was talking now, admitting what Cullen had known all along. The driver who had wounded Jethro Horn was already in a cell. Hertzog would join him as soon as he was able to walk.

"You *will* be all right, won't you, Cullen?" Emily asked him, holding to his good hand with both of hers.

The look in her eyes, oddly, was pretty much the same as the way Marcy was looking at Shelly Horn.

Cullen could recollect telling the young nester to keep away, but right now the shoe was on the other foot, and it didn't seem a very good time to bawl Marcy out. Shelly's stunt with the shotgun had been stupid, nester-like. But the boy had guts, like his father.

"Cullen," Judge Deems said, "I think we can make a deal with the drivers now. That is, if you want to."

"Good," Cullen said. "And there's something else you can do, first thing. That help for the nesters the legislature is hinting about—push for it, hard."

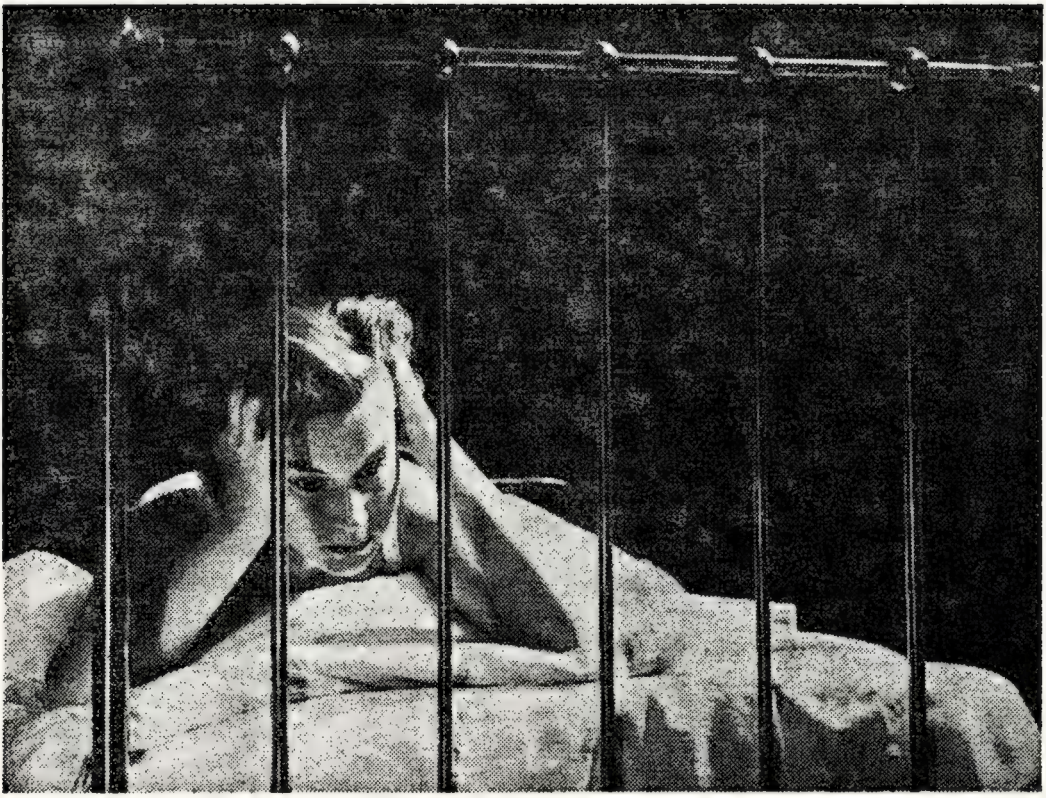
"Help the *nesters!*" Deems said it as though the words were poison. "You sure you're feeling all right, Cullen?"

"About as good as I can be, under the circumstances, Judge. Damn it, let the state help us feed them."

He laughed, and saw the frown leave Shelly Horn's face. Straining, Cullen got to his feet, leaning on Emily.

"Help me over, Emily," he said. "I have something to say to Jethro Horn, if he's awake now."

He hadn't ever shaken hands with a nester before, but it looked like it would be all in the family before long.



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ADP

IF YOU read these columns very often, you've heard of the Cowboy Hall of Fame. It has been a glint in the eye of the dreamers in the Rodeo Cowboys Association for several years, but lately it's been promising to become a reality.

As we told you some issues back, there was a big question where this dedication to the glory of the cowboy would be located. Recently the choice was made—Oklahoma City. Shouts of protest have been ringing in the air ever since. Not that anyone is prejudiced against the town—it just doesn't seem the right place for a memorial to the Old West. It wasn't founded until about 1890, when the big cattle drives were over.

Plenty of Western newspapers have commented unfavorably on this decision. But just about the most outspoken was the editor of the daily in Mitchel, So. Dak., who thinks the Hall of Fame should have been in Dodge City.

The paper said: "Oklahoma City didn't really win the honor on its own merits; it bought the honor. It has been chosen because some tycoons, imbued with booster spirit, have agreed to foot the bill."

"We have an idea," this aroused editor went on, "that a disgusted public is going to say that the Oklahoma millionaires can take their new plaything and drop it down an oil well for all they care.

You might think that the controversy would be confined to the West, and to cities which have a stake in the matter. Not at all. Way back East, the dignified New York "Herald Tribune" had some remarks to make, through one of its columnists, William Chapman White.

"The cowboy was never much bound by geography," says Mr. White. "The broad plains of Wyoming knew him as well as the broader and even dustier plains of Texas and Arizona. Of 'cow towns' where the cowboy turned up when he was in from the range, there was a score or more."

This writer thinks that the best site for the Hall of Fame would have been one of the towns where the cowboys gathered after a cattle drive for talk and entertainment. He agrees with his Dakota colleague who chose Dodge City, "where the longhorns raised dust and the cowboys raised hell from 1878 until 1885."

There's been a lot of sound and fury, but it's unlikely that any real action will be taken. It's not like the old days, you know, when a bunch of Dodge City cowboys would have liked nothing better than to ride down to Oklahoma City, shoot up the town a bit, and bring the Hall of Fame back home, brick by brick.

But as Mr. White philosophically points out, "Probably not even their ghosts will do it. Wherever it is that good and bad cowboys went after they died, they must be laughing now at the whole idea of a Cowboy Hall of Fame.

"Under what man-made building could they put blue sky that swept from horizon to horizon, bright with stars, and a stretch of grass that swept from Deaf Smith County in Texas to the Northern Rockies? Under what roof could they put the night sounds of 10,000 head of cattle, the restlessness of the horses, and the light rustle of tired men asleep, blanket wrapped, on the ground? What man-made building can give 10,000 cowboys the freedom they knew for fifty years?

" 'When that freedom went, mister,' one of them said, 'the cowboy went. That's the moment he turned into a plain ordinary ranch hand.' "

That's a fine tribute to the old-time cowboy, but there are some arguments for the modern cowboy, too, and when we have more room we'll let fly with them.

Adios,
THE EDITORS

"You have a nasty sprain," Clay said. "I'll take you home."

Woman of the West

By LEOLA LEHMAN

KATE HAD BEEN away so long she'd forgotten her old loves and loyalties . . . till a man's life rested on her taking sides

GAUNT, dust caked, Clay Stewart swung along on his rangy Claybank, headed for the Double M. His leg touched the saddlebag with the seven sticks of dynamite, and he thought of how he planned to use them. He wiped the sweat from his face and his lips thinned.

It should never have been necessary for him to make this trip, and he certainly never had expected to have to do so. A handshake agreement with Big Jim Morgan had always been as binding as anything the law could think up, and that had been good enough for Clay.

But now that Big Jim was gone and Jeb had taken over the running of the ranch,

things were different. Clay's cattle were dying of thirst, while the lake formed by the water he and Big Jim had dammed, up on the Double M, was full.

According to the agreement when the dam had been built, the Lazy S was to get water when needed. That was the way it had been for the past five years, but now Jeb had different ideas.

Clay shifted restlessly in his saddle. As he drew near the dam he pulled up, and squinted in the blinding sunlight as he searched the nearby rocks and trees for signs of Jeb or his men. Suddenly he stiffened.

"Steady, boy," he whispered, and drew the claybank behind a clump of greasewood.

He peered through the gnarly branches. Jeb was there, at the foot of the embankment near the sluice gates, and two of his men were with him. They meant business!

"Well, this tears it," Clay muttered.

He sat motionless for a while, deep in thought. This complicated his plan to blow up the dam. He was dead against starting a range war, but, on the other hand, he was determined to have the water that was rightfully his. He sat there figuring how he might be able to get the water without forcing a gun fight.

This enmity between Clay and Jeb was a new thing. Big Jim's wife had died soon after the birth of Kate, his only child. He'd had no desire to marry again, but he wanted a son. When he found Jeb, a penniless orphan, and took him in as his own, it seemed a happy deal for everybody.

Living on adjoining ranches, Clay and Jeb and Kate had gone to the same school and been close friends. They were inseparable until Big Jim decided that Kate needed a woman's influence. That had been when she was still just a pigtailed pest of thirteen.

In the years that followed Kate's exile in the East, she had grown away from her childhood home and friends. Her rare visits back to the ranch were too short to revive her love of the rangeland. Big Jim must have realized the mistake he'd made in sending Kate away, for in his will he had made the provision that she must live for two years on the ranch in order to inherit her share of his estate. The rest of the estate went to Jeb.

Jeb, himself, had turned wild in his late teens, but Big Jim had often said that time and responsibility would take care of such foolishness. And Jeb did seem to change, when he took charge of the running of the ranch after Big Jim was gone. There was a doubt in Clay's mind, though, as to whether the change were for the better.

THE first warning Clay had had of any big change on the Double M was when Jeb let Slade, Big Jim's old ramrod, go. Red Anderson, a new man around Willow Springs, took his place. And Red had the look of a real curly wolf, with his brick-red hair and mean-looking little eyes set in a cold, expressionless face. Red hadn't been on the Double M long before he'd gathered several rough-looking customers around and shoved out the old string of riders.

Jeb went along with Red and there was a new look about him, ruthless and tight lipped, that Clay didn't like. Other outfits started to give the Double M a wide berth. Clay sometimes wondered how Kate liked the new order on the ranch, but he hadn't had much chance to find out.

Right from the day after Big Jim's funeral he knew Kate had changed. He had ridden over to the Double M to pay his respects, and had found that Kate was thinking more about her enforced stay on the ranch than she was about her father. But when Clay walked into the big, pleasant ranch house, he hadn't known that. He found Kate in the living room. With a heavy heart at her loss, he took her hand.

"It's a pleasure to have you back, Kate."

Kate didn't even bother to smile. She stared right at him, through him.

"I'll only be here for the two years I have to stay, and then I never expect to come back," she said coldly.

Rebuffed, Clay got away as soon as he could. When he met her on the street after that, he merely touched his hat to her. She was like a stranger, an unfriendly one.

He had enough troubles of his own to keep him occupied, anyway. There had been a sudden rash of bad luck at the Lazy S. A stampede during his spring drive had cost him heavily and, since he had recently put

more than he could afford into buying a few blooded cattle, the extra expense put him in a tight corner.

Then he began to find his fences cut. Clay was riding fence one day not long after the drive, when he saw one of his old range cows over on Rocking A land. She had been caught outside the fence before, and he shook his head in annoyance.

"That breachy old hellion," he muttered to himself, and urged his horse along. Then he found the break in the fence.

Clay dismounted and picked up the end of wire nearest him, and then raised up slowly, startled. The wire hadn't been broken, it had been cut! He drove the cow back inside and looked for other strays before he mended the fence. And all the time he was working the feeling persisted that something he didn't understand was going on.

In the weeks that followed he had cause to feel that way often, for there were many breaks in his fences. Then a more serious thing happened. Matt, his foreman, rode in one day to report that Clay's registered bull was dead out by the south waterhole.

"Yes, shot," Matt answered in reply to Clay's unspoken question.

Clay had begun to feel surrounded by enemies, and he tried over and over to figure out who they might be. There were no bad feelings that he knew about between him and any of the neighboring ranchers.

Feeling like a traitor, Clay began to wonder about Jeb after he had come by one day and made an offer for the Lazy S.

"Set a price, Clay," Jeb urged. "I'll not haggle with you if it's an offer I can meet."

But Clay was so startled at the thought of parting with even one acre of his land that he'd forgotten to be diplomatic in his refusal. He laughed in Jeb's face and then sobered at the furious, fanatical look on his friend's face.

"Now, Jeb," he protested, "you know I'm not thinking of selling out."

Jeb's face stayed hard. "Just remember I made a fair offer," he said in a tight voice, and then strode out to his horse without another word.

Clay watched him out of sight, trying to push back the sudden unwelcome thought that hammered at him. But even then it didn't occur to him that Jeb might refuse to honor Big Jim's agreement about the use of the water.

IT WAS a dry as dust year and, as the summer weeks dragged by, the water holes on Clay's range went lower and lower, became green and brackish. One day in late July Clay had saddled up his claybank and ridden over to the Double M.

"Hello," he called as he rode in, but nobody answered.

He went up to the door and knocked anyway, and was relieved to hear steps inside. Then the door opened and Kate stood looking up at him. Annoyance flashed across her pert face, and her lips pouted.

"I'm here to see about opening the sluice gates to fill my west waterhole, Kate," he told her, and saw her lips curl scornfully.

"I don't know anything about running the ranch," she told him.

Clay explained the agreement with her father. Kate only shook her head. "I don't know anything about it," she repeated.

Clay felt the red creep up his neck and into his face. Did she doubt his word? An almost overpowering urge to shake the girl raged through him. Instead, he ignored what she implied.

"Big Jim didn't exactly agree to let me have water," he told her stiffly. "The water was mine as much as his. We just dammed it up on the Double M because of the lay of the land. When I got low Big Jim used to open the sluices and let my waterhole fill up."

Kate shrugged. "You'll have to see Jeb," she told him. "He's in town."

A few moments later Clay was headed toward Willow Springs, a curious uneasiness gnawing at him. Things were certainly different on the Double M now that Big Jim was gone. For the first time he wondered if he should have asked for a written agreement about the water. Then he grinned wryly and shook his head. You just didn't ask a man like Big Jim to put an agreement in writing.

When he rode into town he found Jeb in the Post House Saloon and got right down to business.

"I'll be needing water from the dam in a day or so, Jeb," he told the thin, wiry rancher,

and watched all expression leave the face of the man he'd known as a friend since childhood.

Jeb leaned back in his chair and his fingers played with a glass on the table. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Clay stiffened, and a chill went through him. So this was the play! In a flash he remembered the cut fences, the murdered bull, even the unexepected stampede. Was all this a part of Jeb's game to force him to sell out?

He'd bought out a couple of other small ranchers, and Clay wondered now just how those sales had come about. Fury twisted through him and his fists clenched, but back of his rage he knew that he'd need a clear head. With a tremendous effort, he controlled himself.

"You must have known about the agreement, Big Jim and I had," he said, his voice sounding loud in the sudden dead silence of the room.

Jeb pushed his chair back, and the scraping creak tore at Clay's nerves. He braced himself. Then he saw Red and two of his tough-looking wranglers sidle off to one side. Red shoved through the bat wings and was gone, but the others watched with steady, beady eyes. Clay realized that this wasn't the time to settle with Jeb.

A calmness settled over him. He knew where he stood now, at least. He nodded stiffly to Jeb, then turned and walked out through the swinging doors. To the bystanders inside it might look like he was backing down, but he was determined to settle things without starting a range war.

But still, if Jeb wouldn't turn the water through, he'd have to do it himself. If he sold off his cattle in the middle of this drouth he'd have to take a heavy loss. Anyway, the water was his.

About halfway down to the rack where his claybank waited he saw Red coming for him, and he knew then that he might as well have had a showdown inside. There was no mistaking Red's catlike walk, the way his eyes followed every move Clay made, the way his hand hovered above his gun. He was a man on the prod, and he meant to kill.

Clay's nerves tightened. Then he dropped into the vacuum of perfect coordination of a man who has to defend his life. Every muscle and nerve in his body worked together as he walked to meet Red.

Faces appeared like magic in the windows along the street, but Red and Clay walked toward one another unconscious of anyone else. Clay's hand dropped, his fingers hooked and spread. Two guns roared. Red stood queerly, then crumpled.

Clay looked back toward the Post House doorway for a moment. When nobody came out he walked on down to his horse and rode away into the lengthening shadows of the late afternoon.

THAT evening Clay walked down to the bunkhouse. His punchers sat around, some playing poker, some cleaning their gear. All Clay's men had been with him for years; he felt they were his friends. He wanted to give them a chance to leave, if they wished, before any fighting broke out.

But when he told them there was trouble, and offered to let anyone who wanted to go, no questions asked, there was a murmur of dissent. So Clay went on to explain. They knew about the water deal, and just nodded when he mentioned it. Clay looked at their sun-baked faces and then gave it to them straight.

"Jeb refuses to honor the agreement Big Jim made," he said.

He saw the men stiffen, saw the red creep into their faces. Matt reared angrily to his feet. "We'll go tear that blasted dam apart," he growled, and started for the door. The others followed, muttering.

Clay blocked the doorway. "Hold on. We're not going to make the first move in any range war," he shouted. "I just wanted you to know how things stand. I'll handle this alone, if possible."

All the same, when he walked back to the big house he had the good feeling that his men were back of him a hundred per cent if trouble did come.

Next morning Clay had ridden over to the dam. Sight of the big, deep lake eased him. There was enough water for both spreads. He knew now, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that it wasn't the need to save the water for his own stock that had prompted Jeb's refusal

to share. Jeb was trying to force him to sell his range. Clay's eyes narrowed and his lips grew thin and hard. Jeb had taken on more than he could handle this time!

Clay dismounted at the foot of the dam and dropped the claybank's reins. He climbed swiftly up the embankment to the wheel that controlled the sluice gates. As he turned the wheel, the heavy timbers creaked and ground but slowly, inch by inch, they came up. Water, clear and fresh, rushed through the opening.

Half an hour later a leaping, foaming torrent swept through the fully-opened gates into the old riverbed below and down toward his dry, cracked waterhole. Clay mopped the sweat from his face, watched for a moment with satisfaction, and then turned to go down the bank. At that exact moment his hat left his head and he heard the sharp spit of a rifle.

Clay's hand dropped to his six-shooter and he half crouched as he faced the direction from which the shot had come. Kate stepped out from behind a clump of shrubs and came cautiously toward him. At the bottom of the bank she stopped, rifle ready.

"All right," she called, "put those gates back down." And she motioned threateningly.

Astonishment and anger struggled for mastery inside Clay. He stared at the trim, determined girl, and for the first time since her return to the West he saw some resemblance to his childhood playmate. In her jeans and checkered shirt it was hard to look snooty, and her blond hair had come loose and hung softly about her neck.

Only the big, brown eyes looked threatening, and all at once Clay remembered another time when Kate had faced him with just such anger. That was the time he had let another boy bid in her box at a box supper, when she had expected Clay to buy it.

The memory brought a chuckle to his throat. When he saw the rifle tremble in her hands, the realization flashed through him that she wouldn't shoot him, that she couldn't. She was just a mixed-up kid. Deliberately, Clay walked down the bank toward her.

He saw Kate's eyes widen. She backed up a few stumbling steps.

"Stop right now," she ordered.

Clay walked slowly on. Then Kate stepped on a rock, twisted, and fell heavily to the ground. A sharp cry of pain was torn from her, and Clay raced the rest of the way to her side. He put his hand under her head and looked anxiously down into the pretty, pain-filled face.

"Don't move, Kate," he said. "Where are you hurt?"

But Kate struggled to a sitting position, grasped a slim ankle, and rocked back and forth in anguish. "My ankle's broken!" she gasped.

A worried frown creased Clay's forehead. "Let's have a look at it," he insisted, and pried her fingers away from the injured ankle.

He touched and probed at the already swelling ankle. Gentle as he tried to be, Kate winced when Clay moved the injured leg enough so he could tell that she had no broken bones.

"You just have a nasty sprain, Kate," he said. "I'll take you home."

"You don't need to bother," Kate said, coldly. "Just help me on my horse and I can go alone."

CLAY looked at the stubborn set to her lips and didn't argue, just led her horse up beside her and then lifted her to her feet. All rebellion left her face the moment she tried to put her injured foot to the ground, though, and a gasp of pain escaped her. She clung to Clay.

Without a word he lifted her on his claybank and swung up behind her, supporting her with his right arm. He knew that she was weak with shock.

At first Kate lay rigid against Clay's arm, but gradually she relaxed. Clay smiled. She always had been a little spitfire.

"You'll be fine in a few days," he told her, partly to make conversation and partly to reassure her.

Kate looked up at him, her face just inches away. She looked so sweet and unguarded that suddenly Clay had to fight an impulse to kiss the soft lips so near his own.

"You'll be fine," he repeated gruffly.

From then on he was intensely aware of Kate's light weight against his breast. He felt

his heart hammering in a very embarrassing way, and he was afraid Kate could feel the thumps. When he saw the slow smile come across her face and the teasing look in her eyes as she looked up at him, he was sure.

He felt his face getting red. His arms tightened around her. He'd show her she couldn't torment him. Kate struggled, but Clay's lips came down hard on hers. For just a moment her lips trembled under his, and then she jerked back. Her eyes snapped.

Kate's hand flashed up and Clay's cheek stung sharply. "You bully!" she gasped, angrily.

Clay grinned as he ducked to miss another healthy swing. "Still bad tempered," he said, laughing.

But it was more than amusement that he felt. All the old liking he'd had for this girl came surging back, and he turned moody as he remembered that she wanted to see Jeb come out ahead in this argument over the water. He sighed and fell silent.

When they reached the sprawling old ranch house, he turned the girl over to the ranch cook. As Clay turned to leave, Kate spoke shortly.

"You'd better get off this land before Jeb finds out you've opened those gates," she said.

Clay left without answering, his emotions curiously mixed. He thought of Jeb's surly behavior, his own suffering cattle and, laced all through, the memory of the way Kate's lips had trembled under his for a moment before she broke away.

When he went to bed that night, he knew that opening the gates hadn't solved anything. And next morning, when he rode down to the waterhole, he knew that something had to be done, and soon. Gaunt, thirsty steers and cows stood ankle deep in the freshest water they'd had in weeks, and lowed and bawled pitifully.

There wasn't enough water to do any good, and he saw that it had stopped flowing in hours ago. For a long time Clay watched the desperate cattle, and as he watched he made his plans. He hoped he wouldn't trigger off further violence by doing so, but he was going to blow up the dam.

Back at the ranch house, he cleaned and oiled his gun. He knew that, after his opening the gates yesterday, he would find a guard at the dam. But he could handle one man without a killing, he thought. Finished with his gun, Clay put in his saddle pocket seven sticks of the dynamite he'd bought to blast out stumps. Then he swung into the saddle.

NOW, as the old claybank covered the miles with his long, smooth stride, Clay watched for signs of Jeb or his men. Nothing moved in the heat-soaked land, though, and it was only when he was within calling distance of the dam that he saw Jeb and two others squatting at the foot of the embankment, waiting. It was then that he pulled over behind the screen of greasewood.

For a long time Clay sat there in the heat, thinking. In his mind he pictured the lake above the dam. There was a light current where the river flowed in. There was just an off chance that, if he could set the dynamite on a small raft up above the dam, it might drift true enough to blow out the gates, with Jeb and his men none the wiser until the job was done. It was worth a try.

Clay dismounted and began to unbuckle the saddle pocket. Then he froze as a voice spoke softly.

"Raise your hands."

Slowly, Clay raised his hands and turned to face Jeb. The man stood there grinning, a cocky insolence in every line of his wiry frame. Clay knew that he'd been seen, and that Jeb had slipped up on him while he was deep in thought. The other two men strolled up and stood off to one side.

Clay saw that he didn't have a chance. This was the showdown, and he'd been caught flat-footed. Even if he had his gun out he couldn't cover Jeb and the two other men at the same time, the way they were standing. Then there was a rustle off to one side and Kate stepped through some bushes. Jeb's eyes flickered toward her.

"Get out, Sis. This is nothing to you," he said. But she didn't move.

Jeb's mean lips tightened, but he didn't say anything more to her. All his awareness was fastened on Clay. And Clay saw death in her queerly glittering eyes. Jeb began talking softly.

"I'm going to have the biggest spread in

this country some day, Clay," he bragged, and his eyes shone. "I'll be a cattle king, and I don't care how I have to do it. You should have sold to me when I made you a fair offer. Now you won't have another chance, and the law's all on my side." He laughed in a queer, exulting way.

Sickened, Clay stared at Jeb. The man was insane! He saw Jeb pull back the hammer of his gun, and resolution went through him. He had to try for a draw. It was his only chance, and not much of a chance at that, with the other two men and Kate there to finish him off if Jeb failed.

A wolfish grin twisted Jeb's lips, and Clay knew the time had come. His hand rose, fingers spread. Jeb's beady eyes didn't miss a move, Clay knew. Jeb was tormenting him like a cat with a mouse. Then, off to one side, there was a flash of movement. Jeb half glanced away, and Clay took his chance. Two gunshots blended. Jeb fell. Clay swung his smoking gun toward the others, and surprise jolted through him.

Kate had the two men covered, her hand steady as a rock under the heavy gun she held. It had been her movement which had thrown Jeb off balance. And the two punchers, so hell bent for trouble, just moments ago, looked sheepish.

Clay disarmed the men and motioned toward their horses. "Drag it," he ordered shortly.

He stood beside Kate and watched them go, knowing the two men would not return. Then he turned to Kate. She looked away, but he touched her shoulders gently.

"Why did you do it, Kate?" he asked, unsteadily.

Kate swallowed nervously. "Last night I heard Jeb talking about your agreement with Dad, and how he was going to refuse to let you have any water and wanted to run you out of the country so he could get your range." She hesitated. "It was Red who spooked your cattle on the spring drive."

"Is that the only reason you helped me?" he demanded, and forced her to look at him.

Almost unwillingly, Kate shook her head. "No," she whispered.

And Clay knew that Kate was once more a woman of the West, his West. Slowly, he turned to Jeb to do the last service he could for the man who had once been his friend.

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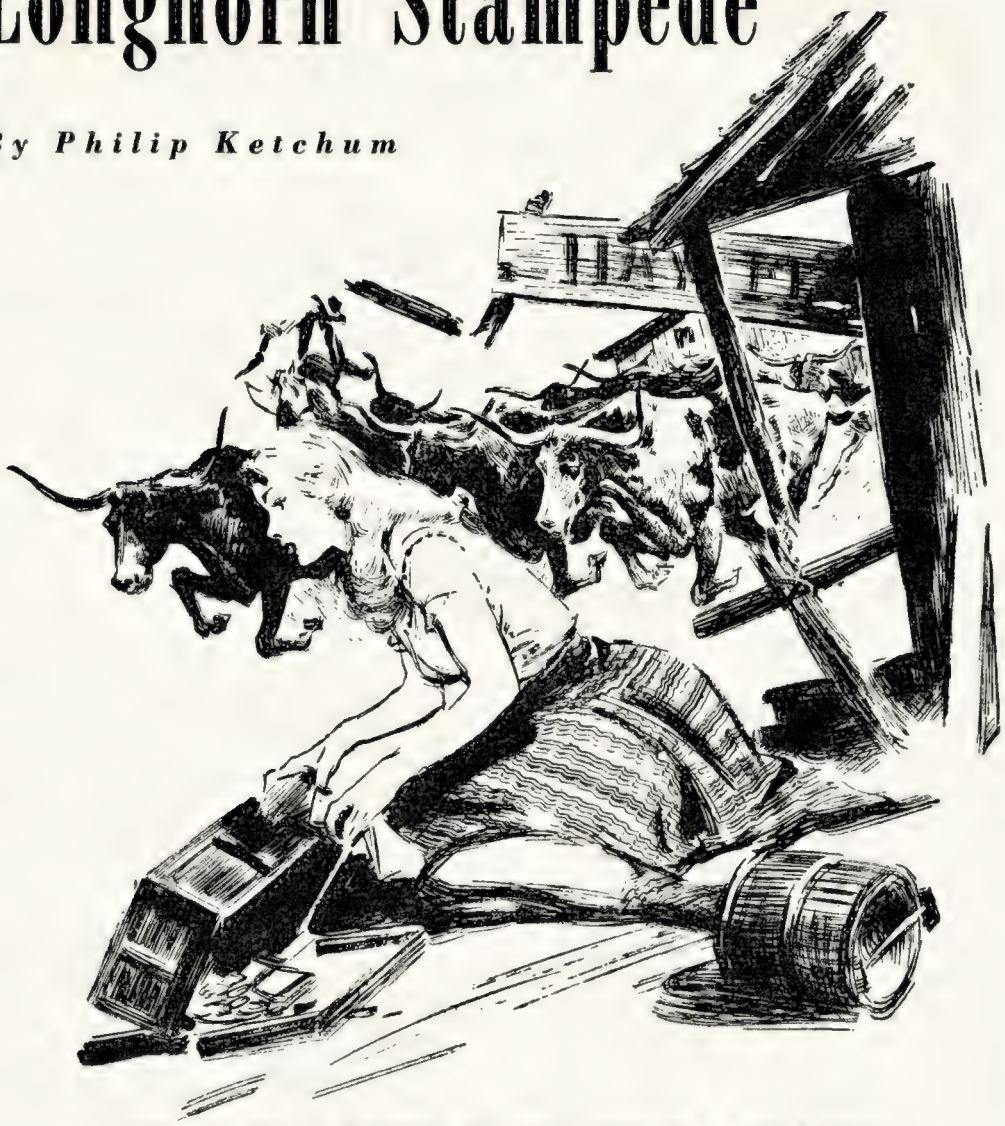
Longhorn Stampede

By Philip Ketchum



Shannon began grabbing for the money with both hands

THE STORY SO FAR: Trail driver LLANO SMITH rides to Tiburon City for help when his boss, DAN HIRSH, gets sick. There he is framed by outlaws RED ROGERS and MILT PARDONNER and thrown into jail. From another prisoner, ANDY TROWBRIDGE, Llano learns that the outlaws are stealing trail herds and forcing the terrorized honest ranchers to take care of the herds till they can be driven to market. Llano and Andy escape, go in search of Llano's herd, find that it has disappeared. They decide to fight the outlaws, but Andy is injured. Meanwhile a ranch girl, GWEN COPELAND, has stirred up the honest ranchers to help Llano in his fight, but they are only fifteen against the outlaw band of fifty.

As this concluding installment opens, SHANNON, a woman mysteriously linked to the outlaws, has just ridden in to where Llano's group is waiting tensely for the attack by the outlaws.

CONCLUSION

McBRIDE and Shannon were sitting their horses at the fence.

"Hello Shannon," Llano called. "This is a surprise."

"A welcome one, I hope," Shannon said.

McBride explained, "I wouldn't have made it here at all if it hadn't been for her."

"I had to help him get away," Shannon said. "I wanted to come and see you, Llano. I want you to reason with a man."

"Rogers?"

"Yes." Shannon glanced at McBride. "You tell him, Mac."

"Well, it's like this, Llano," McBride said. "Most of Roger's men have left him. I'll bet forty men have pulled out of town since last night. They just rode off. Some were supposed to be riding after us, but they didn't. Some were supposed to see what had caused that circle of fires. None of 'em came back."

"How many are there in Tiburon City now?"

"Maybe ten or twelve."

"What about Pardonner?"

"He's still there. So are his two gun slicks, Eberle and Dalhart. Sheriff Horner's there, too. Horner's not a legally elected sheriff, you know, Llano. He used to ride with Red Rogers. Most folks don't know that. When our sheriff got killed, Pardonner brought Horner in and talked folks into giving him the job till election came. It never has, somehow. That was before things got so bad."

Llano asked, "Shannon, what do you want me to do, exactly?"

Shannon said, "Red won't give up; he'll never give up. The hard core of his followers hasn't left him. Right now they're planning the best way to fight you ranchers when you ride into town. Red says he can always recruit more men. And he can; lots of riders who come up the trail from Texas lost their money gambling in Ellsworth, and are ready for anything. All Red has to do now is wipe out this Committee of Fifteen, and he'll be in the saddle again."

"We might be hard to wipe out," Llano said.

"That's just it," Shannon agreed. "Red will fight, and you will fight. And more people will be killed, unless another way can be found to settle the trouble."

"What other way?"

Shannon leaned forward. "Llano, I owe Red a great deal. I'd have lost my place if it hadn't been for him. I don't want him killed; I don't want you killed. I know you two will never come to an agreement, but you *can* talk to him, reason with him, as I said. And you could tell him the ranchers meant what was on the notices you posted in town—that he can ride away from here unmolested.

"He can ride away," Gwen said.

"But he won't, as long as he thinks he can win," Shannon said. "If he *knows* he's lost, it'll be different."

"So what do you want me to do?" Llano asked.

"Ride back with me to Tiburon City," Shannon said. "Take as many men with you as you want to. I can get you into town without Red's knowing it. You can surprise and disarm him. The whole town will be back of you then, and Red will know he's lost. He's proud. That kind of blow to his pride would finish him, and he'd ride. And all the men who would have been killed in a gun fight won't be killed."

"It's a trap!" Gwen exploded.

"It's not," Shannon said. "I'll be riding with you. Do you think I want to die?"

Gwen pleaded, "Don't listen to her, Llano. She's one of them; she's always been."

LLANO stared at McBride. "How do you know there are so few outlaws left in Tiburon City? You said you were being held and couldn't get away."

"I was being held—in Shannon's saloon. But I could hear things. Then Shannon asked the two men guarding me to help her move something in her rooms. That gave me a chance to get outside. When she met me behind the livery stable, I had the horses ready."

"I'm supposed to be in bed right now, asleep," Shannon said. "We can slip into town through the east side and get to my place. I know where we can leave our horses. Red's coming to see me in the morning, and when he does . . . . But you have to promise me there'll be no shooting."

Llano nodded. He said to the fence guard, "Find Samuelson, Masters, and Wexler."

"You're a fool," Gwen said, anger in her voice.

She sat very straight in the saddle, her back rigid. In the half light Llano could see her strained expression.

"Gwen," he said, "something we don't understand has been happening in town. We expected to be chased this morning, but we weren't. That outlaw, Cooper, we picked up told us about the same story that McBride has. And if there's any way to avoid a shoot-out with the outlaws, we must take it. Otherwise all of us will most likely die."

"You'll die faster in a trap."

"Maybe it's not a trap."

"Then you're blind, Llano Smith!" Gwen shouted. She wheeled away and raced off into the darkness.

"She's in love with you," Shannon said, smiling.

He looked at Shannon, wondering. There probably were a good many sides to Shannon. He didn't know, and might never know. She had helped him, yet she felt a loyalty to Red Rogers. Tonight she was betraying Rogers in order to save his life. She was confusing.

Lou Masters, Samuelson, and Con Wexler rode up, and Llano explained Shannon's proposal.

"It *could* be a trap," Masters said thoughtfully, "but many an outlaw is like Cooper—brave as hell when he has a crowd to ride with, but ready to run if the other side looks tough."

Wexler said, "I'll take a whack at it if Llano says so."

"I'll go along for the ride," Samuelson added. "Who else?"

"Tom Standish and Frank Wall," Masters suggested.

"And McBride," Llano said.

He wasn't sure why he had included McBride. He thought McBride seemed a little reluctant, but he could be wrong.

"What about the cattle?" Lou Masters asked.

"The boys can haze them on through as soon as we've gone," Llano said, "and hold the herd in the upper valley until we can get word back. Keep them stirred up and ready to run. If things go wrong in town, we'll want to throw them that way." He glanced around and saw that Tom Standish and Frank Wall had ridden up. "Everybody ready? Let's go!"

They made a fast ride to Tiburon City, but didn't go thundering into town. They left their horses in an empty barn at the edge of town and crept toward Shannon's place, a silent line of figures holding close to the ground shadows. It was still dark, but it wouldn't be much longer. The first faint trace of the coming morning could be seen in the eastern sky.

Shannon led the way to the back of her saloon and living quarters. Llano crouched under her bedroom window. No sounds could be heard from the street. None of the houses they had passed had been lighted. But there would be lights in the Gypsy Queen. And somewhere men must be on guard.

"We'll go in through the side door," Shannon whispered.

Her hand rested briefly on Llano's arm, pressing it. She looked into the passageway, but drew quickly back.

"What is it?" Llano asked.

"A man passing in the street."

Llano thought he heard a faint jingle of spurs as she took another look up the passageway, then slid around the corner. Llano kept close behind her, the others following him.

SHANNON unlocked the door and stepped inside. Llano slipped in after her, his eyes straining to probe the shadows. If this were a trap, here was the perfect place to spring it. But he could detect no movements anywhere in the darkness. The others crowded into the room and crouched quickly to the floor. One of them silently closed the door.

"So far, so good," Shannon said quietly. "You'll want to search these rooms, I know—and the saloon. Do it as silently as possible." She sounded tired. There was a flat note in her voice.

"McBride," Llano said, "you and Masters take the saloon; Wexler, the bedroom; Samuelson, the kitchen."

Samuelson felt his way to the kitchen, and in a moment struck his head out the kitchen door and called, "Hey, Llano, there are still coals in the stove. How about some coffee?"

"I'll help," Shannon offered, and she moved toward the kitchen.

Wexler reported that the bedroom was empty. McBride whispered that there was

no one in the saloon. Llano sensed their relief. He felt it himself. It was risky, what they were doing.

"Sit down and wait," he suggested. "We'll put a man near each window, in here and in the bedroom. McBride and Masters, go to the front windows in the saloon. We have maybe an hour to kill."

Llano felt suddenly uneasy. Why would Red Rogers be coming here so early? What was Rogers to Shannon? Llano found a chair and sat down, but he was too restless to sit still. He got up, went into the saloon, and stood with Masters at one of the windows. He could see lamplight at the windows of the Gypsy Queen Saloon, across and up the street. A solitary figure stood in the dim shadows in front of it.

"That man marches up and down the street, then ducks into the Gypsy Queen," Masters told him. "I haven't seen anyone else—and there are just three horses tied in front of the Gypsy Queen."

Shannon called him when the coffee was ready. She brought a cup to him in the saloon.

"We're keeping the fire going, making more coffee," she whispered. "The pot is too small for a crowd like this."

The coffee was hot and strong. Llano sippped it. "Why is Red coming to see you this morning?" he asked.

"He always does when he's in town," Shannon answered. "We have early breakfast together. That's little enough to do for a man who's been a good friend."

"Or more than a friend, Shannon?"

She caught her breath. He expected a sharp answer, but instead Shannon turned and hurried back to her quarters. Llano took another sip of coffee. Gray light was sifting in through the window now, thinning the shadows.

Frank Wall asked, "Anything doing on the street, Llano?"

"One man on guard," Llano answered.

Shannon came from the kitchen, a cup of coffee in each hand. "For the men in the saloon," she murmured as she passed them.

"I think I'll take a look at that guard," Frank Wall said.

He followed Shannon into the saloon, and the next instant Llano heard his pounding footsteps, a half-muffled shout, and the noise of a struggle. He broke toward the saloon. Two men were locked in a fight near the door. Shannon was at the bar. A gun whipped into the air and slashed downward. One of the men at the door dropped to the floor.

Llano found Frank Wall standing over McBride's prone figure.

"He was here at the door when I came in," Wall said. "He was opening it. And look over there!"

Face-down in the shadows under one of the front windows lay Lou Masters. Llano knelt at his side. There was a lump on Masters' head and he was unconscious.

"Slugged," Llano muttered.

"I reckon McBride didn't want any part of this," Wall said. "I reckon he wanted to get away while he could. But why did he come with us?"

Llano glanced at Shannon. She was leaning against the bar, breathing fast.

"Funny," he said, rising to his feet, "that McBride should wait until Shannon was in here before he tried to get out. Were you going with him, Shannon?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Shannon answered.

"Call in the others, Frank," Llano ordered.

Frank Wall gave him a strange look, glanced nervously through the window, and hurried across the saloon.

"You're wrong, Llano," Shannon said.

"I wish I were," Llano said bleakly. "But I'm remembering now about how Pardonner and Eberle came to your rooms from this saloon and headed straight for your bedroom door, just as if somebody had told them they would find me asleep in that room. And I can understand now why Red Rogers protected Merle Dant. He didn't want her, except to pull suspicion away from another quarter. He had a woman in Tiburon City—his wife, Shannon. You."

"No!"

Llano went on, "When you saw me in court you recognized me as Sam Todd. You knew Sam Todd was an outlaw. You helped me because you thought Sam Todd might be used."

"No, Llano!"

THE ranchers, crowding into the saloon, were listening, a restless, edgy group, confused by what they were hearing.

Llano went on inexorably, "When Red Rogers was a carpetbagger in Texas—under another name—his headquarters were in Natchez. That's where you saw Sam Todd. That's where you met and married Red Rogers. He was supposed to have deserted a beautiful wife when he left Texas, but actually you, his wife, went with him. Here in Tiburon City you and Red found a gold mine. You could use your Texas loot to buy stolen cattle. You got Pardonner to act as the buyer—Pardonner, a broken-down bartender and an outlaw himself. If the men who rode for Red knew he was buying for himself the cattle he stole, they'd have wanted a bigger cut out of his profits."

Shannon was still shaking her head. She seemed unable to speak.

"Wexler," Llano said, "I don't know what kind of mess we've walked into, but while we're waiting to find out, you take a look in Shannon's bedroom. Maybe you can find what's left of the loot she and Red Rogers brought up here from Texas."

Shannon took a step toward Llano. "I do have money back there," she cried, "but it's my money. It's money I earned!"

Llano shrugged. "We'll see."

The night shadows had vanished now. Gray dawn lay over the town. The man in front of the Gypsy Queen, who had been staring toward the livery stable, suddenly opened the saloon door and shouted to somebody inside. Another man appeared and looked up the street.

Llano walked to the entrance, opened the door McBride had unbolted, peered toward the livery stable, and quickly drew back. A crowd of horsemen were riding into town—thirty men or more. Red Rogers' gang had returned.

This was the trap Gwen had said it would be! Llano and the men who had ridden here with him had been completely fooled into believing that Roger's gang had deserted him. But they had only withdrawn to the hills, and now they were back. In another minute Shannon's would be surrounded. And for those inside there would be no escape!

Frank Wall had found some cord and was binding McBride's arms and legs. Lou Masters groaned, then sat up, fingering the lump on his head.

As he saw what Wall was doing, he grumbled, "You never know about men, do you? I always liked McBride."

"Humph!" said Wall. "McBride isn't the first man Shannon's talked into trouble."

Shannon glanced at him, then at Llano. In the morning light her face looked haggard. "Llano," she said, "you have to listen to me! Not all of what you've guessed is true."

"Take a look out the window," Llano said gruffly.

Con Wexler came into the saloon, a heavy box in his arms. "Look what I found," he said.

Shannon ran to him and tried to pull the box away from him, screaming that it belonged to her. Wexler shouldered her off and sat the box on the bar. Llano moved over to it, but the box was carefully padlocked.

He said, "Shannon, give me the key."

"Never!" Shannon cried. "Everything in that box is mine."

Llano drew his gun and shot off the lock. He whistled when he saw that the box was more than half-filled with Federal bank notes. There were some papers, which he examined briefly. Most were deeds to land acreage in Texas, and were made out to Carl Taggert.

"I reckon we don't need more proof than this," Llano said. "Wexler, take charge of this thing for now."

"Maybe Shannon would like to look at it and think of all it might have bought for her," Wexler said, chuckling.

She whirled on him, slapping him sharply, but Wexler only laughed as he caught her by the shoulders to hold her away so she couldn't reach him.

"You have a nice face and figure, Shannon," he told her. "Too bad you aren't nice all through." He pushed her away from him so hard she fell, but no one offered to help her off the floor.

"Maybe you'd better stay right where you are, Shannon," Llano said. "There's going to be shooting in a little while."

LOOKING through the window, he saw no one in the street, but caught a glimpse of two men at the corner of the feed store. There were two more at the barber shop down the street. Shannon's probably was covered from every angle.

"What can we do?" Masters asked.

"One of two things," Llano said grimly. "Fight—or surrender."

"Then we fight. But we don't have much to fight with, do we?"

"We have six men, without McBride," Llano answered. "We have Shannon as hostage. We have a box of money. And up the valley we have a herd of cattle. If we could only get word to the men there—"

If those cattle up the valley *could be* stampeded into Tiburon City, the outlaws would have more than they could handle. It looked as if a stampede was the only possible way out. For, although Rogers might be talked into making a deal for Shannon and the money, no one could be sure he would keep it.

"Wait here," Llano said suddenly, and hurried to Shannon's bedroom.

Grabbing clothing from her wardrobe, he carried it to the kitchen and piled it on the fire, until a steady column of smoke was going up the chimney and rising into the air. Surely someone up the valley would understand what the smoke signal meant.

Gwen would know, Llano thought. He whispered under his breath, "Gwen, tell the men to drive the herd this way, to whip them into a stampede!"

Then he heard Lou Masters calling him, and ran back to the saloon. The ranchers were crouched below the windows, looking into the street. Shannon was getting up. She looked at Llano without any sign that she recognized him. Her hair hung in tangled confusion around her shoulders.

"Llano," a gruff voice called from the street. "Llano Smith!"

"That's Sheriff Horner," Masters said, "and he's out in the open. He has more guts than I thought he had."

Llano saw the sheriff's bulky figure in front of the Gypsy Queen. He was wearing two guns and carrying a rifle.

"Llano Smith," he called again, "walk out with your hands up, or we'll open fire. All of you march out. We have the place surrounded!"

"Throwing the law at us," Masters growled. "How do you like that?"

"Wexler, you and a couple of men barricade the door to Shannon's rooms," Llano ordered. "Better keep an eye on her, too."

"This is the last chance, Llano," the sheriff called. "Five minutes. No more." He dug a watch from his pocket and cupped it in his hand.

Llano asked the others, "How about it?"

"I'd just as soon get it here as outside," Masters said.

"Yep, we can hold out here for quite a spell," Standish added.

"I'm not stepping out there," Wexler growled, as he, Wall and Samuelson came back from the bedroom.

"Tell them to shoot and be damned!" Samuelson told Llano.

As they talked, Shannon took a chance. She sped to the bar, grabbed the money box, and was looking wildly around for a way out, but Wexler saw her. He caught her, and after a brief struggle took the money box away from her. Shannon screamed at him, cursing him as he put the box on the floor and sat down on it.

He said, "Shannon, if you could have loved a man like you love this money, what a wonderful thing it would have been for both of you."

Shannon didn't look at all like the woman she had been just a short time before. Her blouse was torn half off, all her clothing was soiled from the floor. Flinging back the disordered hair which had fallen over her face, she tried to lunge at Wexler.

"I'll whip the hell out of you, Shannon, if you don't keep away from me," Wexler snapped. "You don't get this money box, and that's final."

Shannon was glaring at him, weaving from side to side like a rattler about to strike, when from outside Sheriff Horner called, "Time's up! How about it, Llano?"

"We have Shannon in here," Llano drawled, "with her money box. Ask Rogers what he wants to do about it."

Red Rogers' voice thundered from the doorway of the Gypsy Queen, "Come back

here, Horner! Give them another five minutes."

Llano chuckled. "They have to do some figuring. Rogers doesn't want to lose that box any more than Shannon does."

He hunkered down, grinning at the others, and they gave him answering grins. They were only ranchers, with no dependence on their guns, badly outnumbered, pinned down, with little or no chance of escape, yet not one was whining. McBride? He had lost out to Shannon.

In five minutes the sheriff again called, "Llano! Turn over Shannon and the money box and you'll get half an hour's start out of here."

Llano called, "What guarantee?"

"You don't need any guarantee but my word," the sheriff blustered.

"That won't do."

"Then you have *my* word!" Rogers shouted.

"Your word, Rogers?" Llano roared. "What good is that?"

"Take it or leave it, Llano!" Rogers shouted furiously. "I have forty men, if it comes to a fight!"

LLANO took a quick glance up the valley. If his smoke message had been understood, Gault's cattle could have been whipped into a stampede by this time. But he saw nothing, heard nothing.

The sheriff shouted, "You have another five minutes to think it over, Llano, and that's final."

"Horner's being mighty brave, mighty sure of himself," Samuelson grumbled. "He must figure we have to give up."

Llano moved back to where Wexler was sitting on the money box with Shannon watching him, her eyes sharp, steady.

"When the shooting starts, get her down on the floor if you have to knock her down," Llano ordered.

"Take a look at her," Wexler said uneasily. "She's out of her head."

"Nope, she just doesn't mean to give up the money. Money is more important to her than life. And once that disease hits you, you're finished."

[*Turn page*]

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He walked back to the door, just as the sheriff called, "Time's up!"

Llano said, "Lou, how good are you with a gun? Think you could knock off the sheriff's hat?"

Masters fired through the window. There was a crash of splintering glass and the sheriff's hat jumped from his head as though puffed off by the wind. Horner started running for the saloon in a crazy zig-zag.

Llano expected an immediate blast of shooting from the outlaws, but instead he heard Rogers shouting, "Llano, send Shannon out!"

She was on the floor now, struggling with Wexler, who had leaped to his feet. She twisted free of him, crawled to the money box, and huddled over it as though daring Wexler to try to take it back. She wouldn't leave here unless she could take that box with her.

"Sorry, Rogers," Llano shouted. "Shannon's decided to stay with the money."

A shot was his answer. Then a dozen more ripped into the saloon from vantage points up and down the street. Llano had dropped to the floor, as had all the men except Tom Standish, who snapped a shot at someone before he, too, hugged the floor.

Bullets began drilling steadily into the saloon then. Llano reared up for a quick look into the street, and whipped a shot at a man at the corner of the building.

Llano could see now that, like Shannon, Red Rogers was more interested in the money than in anything else. He had ordered his men to open fire, knowing that Shannon might be hurt, but that a fight would pin the money down where it was.

The firing from the street grew heavier. Llano felt a scraping pain across his shoulder, heard Wall grumbling, "Damn it, my leg!"

"Back to the bar and behind it!" Llano called. "They'll have to rush this place to take us. We can hold out longer from behind the bar."

They crawled that way, Samuelson dragging the bound McBride. Wexler got Shannon and the money box behind the bar, but it was a struggle. Frank Wall started chuckling.

"What's so funny?" Masters asked.

"Think of all the good free whisky around us," Wall said, "and we're too damned busy to bother about it."

The firing which had slackened off for a moment, broke out again. Above the roaring of guns, Llano could hear Rogers encouraging his men.

"We've driven 'em back from the windows," Rogers yelled. "Maybe half of 'em are down. Let's rush 'em and get this over with."

Crouching, Llano stood up and looked over the bar. He snapped a shot at a man who was crawling past the window toward the door, heard him scream. As he reloaded, Masters and Sandish, near him, were whipping shots through the other window.

Samuelson touched him on the shoulder. "McBride says to cut him loose and give him a gun. I've been talking to him, Llano. He says he doesn't know what come over him. Shannon took him to her room, and before he knew what had happened he was sweet-talked into helping her.

"All right, cut him loose and give him a gun," Llano said shortly.

The heavy firing from outside kept up, with Rogers shouting, urging his men to close in. Tom Standish coughed, staggered back, and dropped to the floor. Lou Masters stooped over him, then straightened up.

"Through the chest," he said bleakly. "We can't take much more of this, Llano . . . Listen! What's that?"

THROUGH the air a low, rumbling sound could be heard even over the roaring guns. It was a sound like that of rolling thunder in the distance, and in it was a humming note. Each instant it grew louder. Through the window Llano could see men running up the street. One looked back over his shoulder, threw his rifle away, and ran harder.

"What's happened?" Masters cried.

"Gault's cattle!" Llano shouted. "The stampede, Masters! Let's see how Rogers handles this!"

He hurried around the end of the bar, past Shannon who was huddled over the money box, with Wexler crouched near, and on to the nearest window. All shooting outside had stopped now, and the rumble of the approaching stampede was becoming louder.

Rogers was on the porch of the Gypsy Queen, yelling at his men to take cover there,

but most of the outlaws were fleeing toward their horses, wanting only to get out of the path of the rushing longhorns. The bawling, thundering roar made by Gault's cattle dinned against Llano's ears.

"They'll flatten this town like a pile of kindling," Masters said.

"No they won't," Llano said, "Sheds and outhouses will go down, but the buildings will stand. They'll choke up the streets and drift into the alleys between the buildings. And they'll jam up against the hills beyond town. Here they come, up the street."

Someone rushed from the back of the saloon to the door, pulled it open, and leaped out on the porch. It was Shannon, with the money box under her arm.

Llano raced to the door, shouting at her, but Shannon was already running across the street, so precipitately that she tripped and fell, dropping the box. The lid flew open, spilling bank notes all over the street. Scrambling to her knees, Shannon began grabbing for the money with both hands.

Llano yelled, "Shannon, get out of the street!"

She didn't hear him. She couldn't have heard him, for the thundering herd had hit the town. A jamming mass of cattle reaching from one side of the street to the other was rolling toward her, their bawling making a bedlam din.

Across the street, on the porch of the Gypsy Queen, Red Rogers was screaming at Shannon, but his voice was muted in the roar of the stampede.

Llano had started toward Shannon, who was still on her knees, grabbing money off the street and stuffing it into the box, when Lou Masters and Samuelson caught him and held him back. And at that moment Milt Pardonner appeared on the porch of the Gypsy Queen, his whipped-up gun aimed squarely at Llano. Llano didn't even see the man. He was aware only of a sudden pain stabbing his shoulder, and the sagging of the porch as the onrushing cattle surged against it.

In the street, Shannon looked up, her face dirt-streaked, hair tumbled about her shoulders. She might have screamed. She lifted

[*Turn page*]

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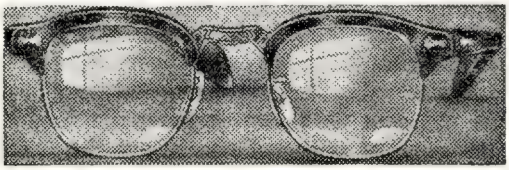

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both hands as though to hold back the brown flood sweeping toward her. Llano had that one last glimpse of her; then the cattle had swept over her.

Llano fell back to the doorway, a sick churning in his stomach, a bitter taste in his mouth. He saw Pardonner on the porch of the Gypsy Queen then, saw the raised gun in his hand. He saw Red Rogers' gun lifting, knew the outlaw leader was screaming at him, cursing him, blaming him for Shannon's death.

Llano fired at Rogers, then quickly switched his aim and fired two shots at Pardonner. But when he triggered once more, the hammer fell on an empty shell.

A blow in the chest he didn't realize was a bullet had driven him backward. A haze seemed to be lifting between him and the men on the porch of the Gypsy Queen. As hands seized him and drew him through the doorway, the haze thickened. He was not at all sure whether or not he saw Rogers drop to his knees and pitch forward, or whether Pardonner was down.

"You damned fool," Lou Masters growled, "get back in here."

Llano had no more than been pulled through the door when the porch gave way. The whole building shuddered under the thrust of the cattle. The deepening haze before Llano's eyes seemed to be sweeping through the room. Unaware of it, he sank back against Lou Masters, who lowered him to the floor.

DR. GARMISH finished changing the dressing on Llano's wounds, then dug his pipe out of his pocket, filled and lit it.

"I've never been so busy in my life," he said cheerfully. "Between you and Andy Trowbridge and Con Wexler and about six other patients, I have a full day facing me each day."

"How is Andy making it?" Llano asked.

"He's running a race with you. He'll be on his feet just as fast, or so he says. Of course he has Merle Dant as a nurse, and there's a bond between them that helps. She's a fine girl, that Merle Dant. Andy's lucky."

Llano nodded. "If you can't get me on my feet, you have to get me on my horse before Samuelson brings Andy and Merle to town."

"Why?" Garmish asked.

"Because its on my knees I'll have to be when I face Merle. I had her figured wrong, Doc."

"Anybody could have figured her wrong," Garmish answered, and changed the subject. "Wexler will be up in a day or two."

Llano lay silently thinking. He was hoping Con didn't blame himself for what had happened to Shannon. When Wexler had been hit he hadn't had a chance of stopping Shannon from grabbing the money box and running to the street.

"The town sure didn't look like much for a while," Garmish commented. "Four barns were down, the board walk and every porch along Main Street was smashed. Gardens were ruined—Mrs. Hooper's flower bed, too. She's going to have something to say to you when she sees you. She thought a lot of her flower bed."

Llano grinned.

"And they're still picking up money in the street," Garmish added, as he turned to the door.

For a while Llano was left alone. Then the woman in whose home he was recuperating brought Lou Masters and Sid Orcutt in to see him. Orcutt looked tired. He and thirty men from Ellsworth had reached Tiburon City the night of the stampede. Since then, they had been riding the hills. Eleven of Rogers' men had been rounded up and were being held for trial. Judge Otto Krump was in town.

"It's about finished," Orcutt told him. "The others have hightailed. For now, at least, the hills are clear of outlaws. We've located your herd." He paused, then went on in a lowered voice, "But the whole crew were killed, Llano. We got that out of one of Rogers's men. If you want us to we'll drive the herd on to Ellsworth, sell it, and bring you the money."

"The money belongs to the widow of Dan Hirsh, down in Texas," Llano said, "except for what should go to the families of the trail drivers. I'll sure appreciate it if you do drive the cattle on and sell them."

"We'll do it," Sid Orcutt promised.

The talk veered then to the stampede. For years there would be talk of that stampede,

and of the deaths of Rogers and Pardonner on the porch of the Gypsy Queen Saloon.

"Gwen Copeland was really responsible for that stampede," Masters said, grinning. "She's the one who guessed what Llano's smoke signal meant, and she yelled at the men holding the herd so loud it would have started any cattle stampeding."

"Lou," Llano said to Masters, "will you do something for me? Stop by Gwen's place and tell her I want to see her."

He had sent such messages to Gwen before, but she hadn't answered them. This time she did. The next afternoon his door opened, and when he looked toward it Gwen was standing there, grave and unsmiling.

"Come in," Llano said.

Gwen came in, closed the door, and stood against it. "What is it, Llano?" she asked.

"You're making it hard for me," Llano said. "I had figured out just what I'd say, but I've forgotten the words. Why haven't you been here before?"

"I've been busy," Gwen said. "I have a ranch on my hands."

"You can't run that ranch alone," Llano said.

"Why can't I?"

"You need a man around the place."

The tight line of Gwen's lips softened, curving into a hesitant smile. Her eyes warmed. She said, "Llano, if I ever sign on a man, it will be for life."

"I'd sign on for life," Llano offered.

Gwen said, "I thought you had to go back to Texas."

"I can mail the money to Texas," Llano said.

In a rush Gwen reached him, dropping to her knees at the side of his bed. Her head sank down on his chest where he had been wounded, and it hurt, but it was a good hurt. Llano held her there.

Gwen whispered, "Oh, Llano!"

He said, "Stay right where you are. That way I'll get well faster."

He felt better already. Nothing could keep him here much longer. He had signed up for life, and when a man did that he wanted to get on the job.

THE END.

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